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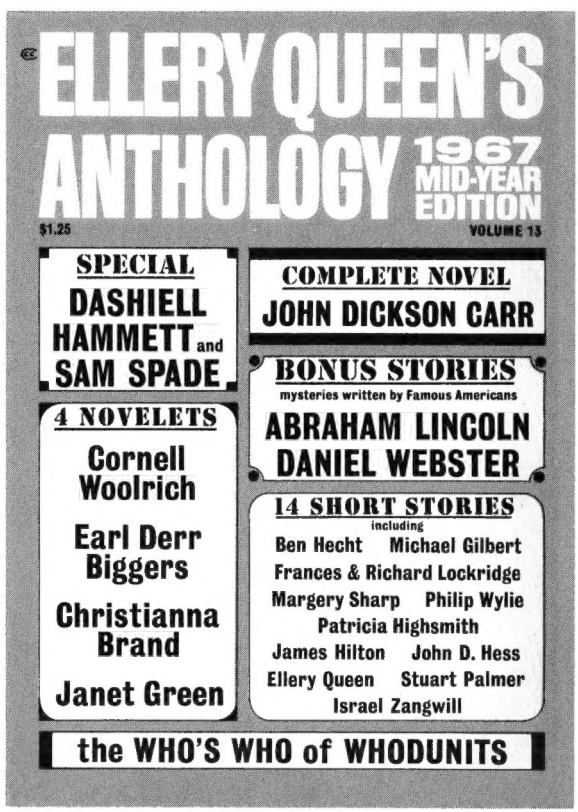

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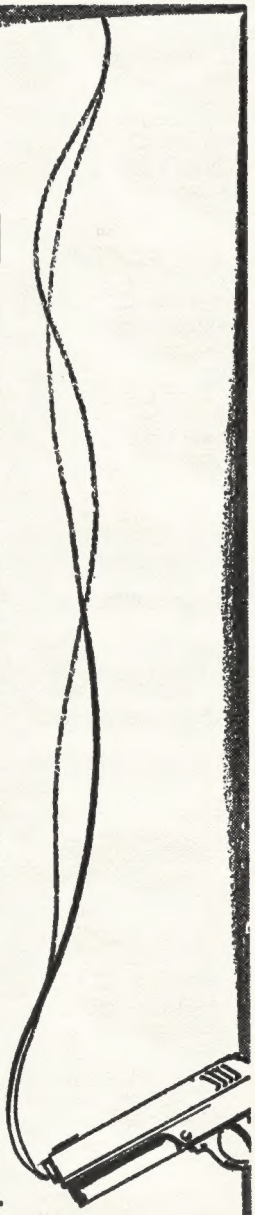

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CORNELL WOOLRICH

Part One of a 2-part serial

Before the divorce laws were changed in New York State there was only one legally accepted grounds for ending a marriage. Stephen Duane didn't like it—in fact, he dreaded and abhorred it—but he had no alternative. And the whole nasty, distasteful business turned out to be a worse mess than he and his lawyer, or his wife and her lawyer, ever dreamed it could be . . . One of Cornell Woolrich's most interesting story situations . . .

DIVORCE—NEW YORK STYLE

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

ONE WORE GLASSES AND CARRIED a brief case; he looked like a lawyer. The other didn't wear glasses and carried an overnight case; all he looked was ill at ease. They were together.

"I'd like a room," the one with the overnight case said a little self-consciously to the registration clerk.

"For both you gentlemen?"

"No, not him," corrected the applicant. "For myself and my wife. She'll be along later."

"Very well. Will you sign here, please?"

The registrant took the desk pen and then turned to look inquiringly at his companion, as though waiting to be told what he should do next.

"Put down your own," the other said in a carefully guarded undertone. "It simplifies things."

The check-in bent over and wrote: *Stephen Duane and wife, New York City.* Then he handed back the pen and the registry card.

"For how long?" the desk clerk asked, to complete the details.

The man who looked like a lawyer answered this, speaking aloud for the first time. "Couple of hours," he said. "No more."

The desk clerk who knew all about such things, or thought he did, winked an understanding eye at him.

The man who looked like a lawyer opened a wallet. "I'll lay it out for you, Steve. It goes with my retainer."

"You coming up with me?" his client asked, with the woebegone expression of a small boy being forced to enter a dentist's office.

"Just for a few minutes, if you want me to. I can't stay too long."

As they turned to enter the elevator, he gave the desk clerk a final instruction. "As soon as the gentleman's wife gets here, send her right up, please."

When they had arrived in the room, the lawyer got on the phone. "Room service, please. Send up a pint of rye, a split of White Rock, some cracked ice, and two glasses."

"No, not for me," moaned the other with a grimace. "Not the way *I* feel."

"It's got to be here in the room," his companion told him inflexibily. "You don't have to touch any of it. But it's got to be here for looks."

Duane slumped into a chair. "I feel terrible. Arnold, have you got an aspirin on you?"

"I always bring some along." The lawyer went into the bathroom, came back with a glass of water, and handed a thumb-sized bottle to Duane.

"Don't feel that way," Arnold said. "There's nothing to feel that way about. You're a grown-up man, not a high school boy on his first hotel-room date."

"I know, but there's something so upside down about all this."

"Forget it," said Arnold, and slapped him encouragingly between the shoulders. He took the glass back from him, set it aside, then took the little bottle and pocketed it.

"Better start taking your things off," he suggested. "I'll have to be going soon."

"Ugh," said Duane.

"Oh, come on," said Arnold impatiently. "Don't be such a baby."

"How far do I have to go?" Duane asked fearfully, slipping the knot of his necktie.

Arnold gestured sketchily, once across Duane's frame and once up and down it. "Just enough to make it look convincing."

Duane creased his brow plaintively. "How much is convincing?" he wanted to know. Arnold accepted the question as rhetorical and let it go unanswered.

Duane unbuttoned his shirt, withdrew it from inside his trousers, and took it off. Then he stopped. "Far enough?" he questioned.

"Oh, for the love of Mike!" Arnold protested irritably. "Stop playacting, will you? You don't have to be told these things. You're a full-grown man."

"I feel like a full-grown damn fool," Duane murmured, painstakingly folding and refolding his shirt. "Far enough, I take it."

He opened the overnight case, removed a pajama top, a lounging robe, and cloth slippers. He put the pajama top on over his undershirt and buttoned it. Then he put the robe on over that and belted it. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed, removed his shoes, and thrust his feet into the slippers.

Meanwhile Arnold was at the phone, waiting to get some number he had unobtrusively asked for. He turned and studied his client, then nodded pontifical approval.

"*Tou' en deshabille*," said Duane nervously, trying to remember his high-school French in order to take his mind off present things. "Or is it *tout?* I think you swing the 't' when there's a vowel coming up next." He kept fidgeting with the belt of his robe, tightening it far more than was necessary.

Arnold suddenly got his connection and spoke into the phone. "Nat? This is Arnold. You can send your young lady over now. My client's all set." He was asked something. "Just a minute. I'll give it to you." He lowered the phone, said to the still-fidgeting Duane, "Go over to the door and see what's on it."

Duane went over, opened it, and looked. Then he turned around blankly. "There's nothing on it. What do you mean?"

"The number, for Pete's sake!" Arnold barked.

"Oh, nine-two-three," Duane called in, reading off the numerals at the top of the door.

Arnold repeated the number over the phone with the expressionless voice of a man giving a stock-market quotation.

A few moments later there was a knock on the door and the drinks and accessories had arrived. Duane backed away nervously as the room-service waiter swung the tray around in putting it down, as though afraid to let it even touch him.

Arnold paid for this, as he had for the room.

"I'll bring your change right back, sir," the waiter said, eying the rather large bill handed to him.

Arnold closed the door. "Sit down," he brusquely ordered the trembling Duane. "Relax. I'm having more trouble with you than trying to mate a porcupine with an octopus."

Duane obediently sat down, but in a very hunched posture, his knees touching.

"Is that the way you're going to be?" Arnold said disapprovingly. "Maybe a drink would help you."

Duane warded off the offer hectically, crossing his arms in and out as though he were semaphoring. "Not for love or money!" He rumpled his own hair distractedly. "I thought I was nervous the day I got married," he groaned, "but that wasn't in it compared to this. At least I knew the girl, then."

"Ah, you're jittery by nature," Arnold told him unsympathetically. "There's nothing to it, nothing to worry about."

"That's because it's not you, it's me."

Arnold flexed his arm to look at the time. "Well, I'm sorry," he announced decisively. "I'm going to leave you on your own now. I have to get back to the office."

Duane made a pain-wreathed face.

"I can't stick around here until they show up," Arnold told him. "I'm not supposed to be in it at all, you know." He picked up his brief case, held out his hand for a good-bye shake "Good luck."

"Good luck he says," Duane sniffed morosely.

"You'll be all right; you won't die from it," Arnold promised him heartlessly as he moved toward the door.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Duane agreed morbidly. "*Not* dying."

Arnold had the door open now.

"'Bye, now," he said briskly.

Duane raised a hand halfway, in a faltering acknowledgment, somewhat like a dying gladiator lying on the sands of the arena; then he let it fall down again, limp.

Arnold closed the door and left his client alone.

After about eight or ten awful minutes—hour-minutes to describe them more correctly—the telephone finally rang. Duane jumped to his feet, stood there a moment quivering all over, particularly at the nostrils like a colt scenting imminent danger, and then went over to it.

The desk clerk's voice said, "Mr. Duane? Your wife's on her way up."

"Huh?" he said blankly, seeming to have forgotten for a moment why he was there.

"Is this Mr. Duane?"

Then he remembered that he was expecting her. Or was supposed to be. "Oh," he said lamely. "Oh, all right. Thank you."

He left the phone and nervously tightened the belt around his robe —almost as if he were trying to cut himself in half. He stood waiting in a cringing attitude, his shoulders defensively hunched, his neck bent, his forehead creased.

A light, unassuming knock came at the door. He swallowed, then slowly went to the door and opened it.

She was in her twenties. Her hair was a dusty blonde color, not the blonde of artifice but the slow, darkening afterglow of a bright childhood-yellow. Her eyes were extremely frightened—brown and frightened; like a pair of tiny brown birds fluttering in a couple of rounded crystalline cages. Her clothing gave no impression of color, or of fashion, or of fabric; it was undistinguished. It gave only one overall impression—that it had been worn quite a lot before, but was still clean and well-kept.

She too carried a small overnight case in her hand.

"How do you do?" she said awkwardly. "Are you the—the gentleman I was to meet here?"

"Yes, I am," he answered with equal constraint. "Are you the—the young lady who was to meet me?"

"Yes, I am," she murmured, her voice barely audible.

"Oh. Well, won't you come in, please?"

He stood back and she came in, and then he closed the door.

"Thank you," she said politely. She put down the case. "Did I keep you waiting long?" she asked, still self-consciously.

"No, hardly at all," he protested.

"I couldn't get a taxi right away," she said. "The traffic's quite bad."

"I know," he said.

Then they were both at a loss, unable to think of anything else to say.

Finally, almost with a jerk, as if forcing it out, she said, "Should I start in to get ready?"

"I guess so," he said haltingly. "Shall I go outside and wait in the hall?"

She glanced around at the bathroom door. "No, you don't have to do that. I can go in there." She picked up the case and went in. The lock turned on the inside of the door.

He felt less nervous, now that the thing had actually started, was under way. He sat waiting and reflecting. Reflecting that you always had to wait for women, whether they were dressing or undressing. Reflecting on someone else he had waited for like this, not once but many times; but he wouldn't be waiting for her any more.

When she came back he rose. He had been taught to do that. For any woman.

She was quite transformed. She carried her street clothing over one arm, the case in the same hand. She wore a negligee of opalescent gray. It was two-ply, the under one pink, the upper one this gray stuff. It was transparent only to the extent that it allowed the under one to peer through. Actually it was a modest negligee.

Below it she wore a nightgown with a yoke of opaque lace from shoulder blade to shoulder blade. Her free hand, interlocking the negligee, allowed a minimum of the nightgown to be seen. He dropped his eyes, embarrassed. She dropped hers too.

"That's real nice," he said presently, trying to be complimentary.

"It belongs to one of my neighbors," she said. "She lends it to me whenever I go out like this."

She took out a brush and stroked her hair with it in front of the mirror. Then she took one last item out of the case—a magazine devoted to motion pictures and movie stars.

She sat down with this in a chair on the opposite side of the bed and opened it at random across her lap. Almost at once someone tapped at the door and they both gave a nervous start.

"Is it them alr—?" she asked.

"I don't think so," he said. "They're supposed to *break* in suddenly, aren't they, not wait like that."

A voice outside settled their uncertainty. "I have your change, sir."

"Oh, it's only the waiter." He went over to the door. At the same time she raised the magazine and covered her face with it.

The waiter came into the room and methodically started to count out bills and coins on the table on which the drinks were standing. The girl kept the magazine in front of

her face through the whole laborious transaction.

The waiter got his tip, mumbled his thanks, and left.

They were now alone again.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked, trying to be hospitable.

"I never drink," she said with a firm shake of her head. "But you go ahead, if you wish."

"I only drink when I'm happy."

That left them about where they had started.

A silence fell. She kept her eyes on the magazine. There was a full-page photograph on the page she had open.

"Is that Sophia Loren you're looking at?" he asked.

This time she looked up with unfeigned interest. "Yes. How could you tell that from all the way over there?"

Even in the upside-down position in which she was holding it, he could identify the actress. But he only shrugged and said, "Would it make you nervous if I talked to you while we're waiting?"

"Oh, no, not at all." She closed the magazine. "Do you have the right time?" she asked.

He told her the time.

"Do you mind if I use the telephone from here? I won't be long."

"Go right ahead," he said.

She went over to it and asked for a local number.

She was turned the other way, and he watched her while she stood there.

"Hello. Mrs. D?" she said. She used the capital letter for a name. "Yes, this is me. How is he? . . . Oh, good! I'm so relieved to hear that . . . I'll try to get back as early as I can. About an hour, an hour and a half. It shouldn't take any longer . . . Is there anything you want me to bring on the way home? . . . All right, I will. I have to hang up now. Goodbye . . . No, I won't worry any more, now that I've talked to you. Goodbye."

She returned smiling to her own chair. He didn't ask her anything, but after a while she saw him looking at her quizzically and she came out with it of her own accord. "My little boy. He has a cold and a sore throat, and I've been afraid it might have got worse. But she says he seems to be fighting it off; she has him sleeping now. She's the neighbor I spoke to you about. She's been wonderful to me. She has a telephone in her apartment. I don't have any."

"Does she know what you wanted the outfit for?"

"I think so. But she's never said a word to me. She's very understanding."

"Has it been very long—that you've been—?"" He stopped, tactfully.

"No. This is only the third time." She looked at her nails. "I don't exactly enjoy keeping score."

"You don't seem at all like—" he ventured, and then lost courage.

"I know—not the type," she supplied. "That's what seems so peculiar

about it. Even to me, at times. Sometimes I can't quite figure it out." She began to recite the catalogue of her credits. "I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't doll up. I use very little make-up. Sometimes I don't even put on nail polish."

"I noticed that," he said approvingly. "They're the first natural nails I've seen on any woman in years."

"When a man looks at me on the street I look the other way. In all the little things like that. I'm so—so irreproachable," she said discontentedly. "And then I go out and do this!"

"It's not so—" But he didn't finish it.

She picked up the meaning for him. "Yes, it is. To me it is, anyway, and my point of view is the only one that counts, because I'm the one who's doing it."

"How did it come about in the first place?" he asked, as though the question had been on his mind for some time and he couldn't hold it back any longer.

"Yes, how *did* it?" she agreed with a bleak smile. "I've asked myself that too. It came about quite simply, really. I ran into Harry's lawyer on the street one day. Harry was my husband. He had died, and there was very little money. The lawyer had helped me collect the little insurance I had coming to me, and he'd given me some part-time typing to do in his office. I couldn't take a full-time job—the baby was too young then. The relief checks helped a little, but not too much.

"Well, when I met him that day he said one of his clients was looking for a girl to—" she dropped her eyes "—to do this. Just pretend to be caught with someone in a hotel room, because the New York State laws won't allow any other grounds for divorce. He said it paid a fee of one hundred dollars."

"What did *you* say?" he asked.

"Not a word. I gave him a look, and then I walked away with my back up. I remember he tried to apologize, but I didn't stand there long enough to listen to him. I walked about a block and a half to the bus stop, and I stopped there and waited. I took out my fare ahead of time, and I found I had only seventy-five cents left after paying it. Three quarters. All of a sudden I started to run as fast as my legs could carry me."

"Away?" he suggested.

"No. Back."

"Oh," he said.

"I ran the whole block and a half. People turned and stared at me. I caught up with him. I grabbed him by the arm. I couldn't talk, I was so out of breath. I just shook my head, yes, like this. Fast and willing."

He was toying with an unlit cigarette. "It's just a job," he said. "It's no different from modeling, really, if you look at it one way."

"Yes, it is," she insisted. "It's even worse than the real thing."

He looked at her startled. "In what way?"

"It's not even as honest. If you do the real thing, you're doing it and you admit to yourself you're doing it. But when you do this, the way I am, you're not doing it and yet you're pretending you are."

He broke the cigarette in half between his fingers and threw it away.

"Oh, I suppose after a few more times I won't care any more," she said resignedly. "So that'll solve the problem for me, in a way."

He gave her a quietly perceptive look. "I don't think you'll ever change," he told her. "You don't strike me as the kind who will."

"You have to. You can't keep it up and not have it do something to you. It's like drops of water falling steadily on the ground. There's bound to be mud after a while."

The steadfast way he kept looking at her had a sort of unspoken respect in it: the way you admire someone who carries herself well in a difficult situation.

He started to say to her warmly, "You know, somehow I can't help telling you this—"

There was a sudden, demanding, almost theatrical pounding on the door—too heavy to be the work of just one person.

They shared a moment of consternation—as if the situation they found themselves in was real, not a pretense.

"They're here!" she gasped. "That's them now!"

She darted toward the uplidded case, exclaiming, "Handkerchief to cover my face with! They're going to take pictures!"

Somebody outside called in, "Open the door!" The voice was loud and yet somehow it managed to be matter-of-fact, as if it was used to this routine.

She raced back to the bed, a large cotton handkerchief in her hand. The negligee streamed out behind her, carried on the air current her swiftness created.

She threw back the covers on her side, rolled herself in under them, and flung them back over her.

"What do I do?" he asked, stage-frightened, and made a tentative move to get in alongside her.

"You don't have to get in with me," she said. "Just sit on the edge, that's enough."

He sat down stiffly on the outermost edge of the bed, his back ramrod-straight.

"Open this door—we want to come in!" The voice was louder now.

She dipped the handkerchief in the ice-cube bucket, soaked it, then plastered it across her eyes and the bridge of her nose like a sleeping mask.

A passkey nagged at the lock, the door opened, and four people came in and fanned themselves around. A woman and three men. One man carried photographic equipment. The second palmed his hand in an Indian-type salute. "House detective," he announced. The third just stood there. He resembled Arnold

a little, not personally so much as professionally.

The woman was a metallic blonde, almost a platinum one. She carried a fur stole over her shoulders.

The hotel detective turned to the blonde woman standing just inside the door. "Is this your husband, Mrs. Duane?"

"It is," she said in a clear but completely unemotional voice. It was almost like the "I do" of a witness being sworn in. Just as mechanical.

The detective turned next to the man on the edge of the bed.

"Are you Stephen Duane?"

"I am," Steve Duane said.

"You admit the lady beside you in the bed is not your wife?"

"I admit it," Steve said.

The detective took out a pocket notebook, made a slashing mark in it, something like a vindictive pothook, then said to the man who obviously represented Mrs. Duane legally, "Just call on me whenever you're ready for my testimony," and left, with an antiquated tipping of his hatbrim to Mrs. Duane.

The wife stared after him, almost in awe, as if she hadn't seen that done in years.

The man with the camera equipment now went into action, focusing from the clear side of the bed, crouching low, as though he were going to spring bodily into it. There was a vivid flash, and the self-confessed adulterer jumped. His "companion in sin" shuddered under the covers.

The lawyer had moved in closer to supervise.

"Pull down your nightgown a little off the shoulder," he instructed, while the photographer was busy shifting the camera angle.

The girl in the bed did not respond.

The lawyer stretched his hand out and did it for her. As he did so, the girl's head turned to that side, as if to watch what he was doing; but oddly enough the wet handkerchief stayed in place, pasted to her face.

The flash this time was cometlike in its brilliance. Steve jumped again. The girl in bed was motionless.

"What're you trying to do, broil us!" Steve shouted belligerently.

"Now one around on this side," the attorney said, stage-managing from the opposite side of the bed. "Put your arms around each other, you two."

"I will like hell!" Steve yelled. He raised his arm threateningly at the two of them. "Get out of here or I'll bust the both of you!" he snarled with unexpected vehemence. "You've taken all the pictures you're going to get!"

They both backed away apprehensively. "I guess that'll have to do," the lawyer conceded reluctantly to his photographer.

The photographer turned and made for the door. He nodded affably to Mrs. Duane as he passed her.

"My that was quick!" she complimented him. "You sure know your job." She was always very well-

mannered to people she wasn't married to.

"I try my best," he said casually.

"Okay," the lawyer said, closing the door. "I guess that leaves only the principals in the matter." He turned toward the photogenic bed. "You can take off the handkerchief now, young lady. We're all just one big happy family."

Steve's wife blew a cynical stream of smoke. "Well, big anyway," she amended with a look at her soon-to-be-ex-husband's discontented face, "if not happy."

The girl in the bed kept the handkerchief on. In fact, she didn't seem to have heard the attorney's instruction.

"Is she asleep?" the lawyer asked, his voice puzzled.

"Probably likes the bed so much she doesn't want to leave it," Steve's wife suggested nastily. "Intends to spend the rest of the night in it."

The lawyer went over to peer at the girl more closely. Then he leaned over and tapped her lightly on the shoulder. The tap became a touch. The touch became a tightened grip. The grip became an urgent shake. The girl rolled with the shake, but not of her own volition. When he turned back to look at the Duanes his face was ashen.

"She's out," he quavered. "Out cold. It even looks to me like she might — "

He took a metal-barreled pencil out of his inside pocket and using the tip of it with infinite finesse, lifted an edge of the handkerchief and folded it back. One eye was exposed. Open and staring.

"I'd better get hold of my lawyer," Steve said shakily, making a move toward the phone. "He was the one who sent her here."

"You don't need a lawyer," the other man told him bluntly. "You need the police. This girl is dead."

"Oh, no!" protested Steve's wife in dismay. "Let me out of here. That's all I need!" And with a flurry of her fur stole she whirled and ran out.

The lawyer lingered only a moment more. "She must have been dead through the whole show," he said with a sickened look. "Her body temperature's already down considerably."

"And me next to her," Steve moaned. "I *thought* I didn't feel her move."

And the next thing Steve knew, the door slammed shut and he was alone and half dressed in a hotel room, with a dead stranger on the bed to explain away.

(*to be concluded next month*)

the *NEWEST* Inspector Maigret story by

GEORGES SIMENON

first publication in the United States

The story of two hangings on the Seine, against the interesting background of weirs and locks, barges and tugs, with Chief Inspector Maigret called into the case when all the other investigators had failed—Maigret as surly as the Seine itself, Maigret puffing constantly on his pipe, Maigret perplexed and irritable and grumbling and finally coming round to "thinking bargee" —to thinking the way barge people do . . .

INSPECTOR MAIGRET THINKS

by GEORGES SIMENON

THE LOCK-KEEPER AT COUDRAY was a thin sad-looking chap, dressed in corduroys, with a drooping mustache and a suspicious eye—a type one often meets among bailiffs.

He made no distinction between Maigret and the fifty people—detectives from Corbeil, officials from the Public Prosecutor's office, and reporters—to whom, for the last two days, he had been telling his story; and while he did so he kept watching, up and down river, the greenish-blue surface of the Seine.

It was November. It was cold, and a white sky—garishly white—was reflected in the water.

"I had got up at six in the morning to look after my wife," he said, and Maigret thought to himself how it was always these decent sad-looking men who have sick wives to take care of.

"Even as I was lighting the fire it seemed to me that I heard something. But it was later, while I was upstairs preparing the poultice, that I finally realized that someone was shouting. I went downstairs again. From the lock itself I made out a dark shape against the weir.

" 'What is it?' I shouted. A hoarse voice replied with 'Help!'

" 'What are you doing there?' I asked him.

"He went on shouting, 'Help! Help!' So I got out my dinghy to go over. I saw it was the *Astrolabe*. As it was getting brighter, I was finally able to make out old Claessens on the deck. I'd swear he was still drunk, and knew no more than I did

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what the barge was doing on the weir. The dog was loose, even though I had asked him to keep it tied up. That's all—that's all I know."

What mattered for him was that a barge should have come and run aground on his weir, at the risk, if the current had been stronger, of smashing it. The fact that the only thing found on board—other than the drunken old stableman and a big sheepdog—was two hanging corpses, a man and a woman—that didn't concern him at all.

The *Astrolabe*, afloat again, was still there, about a hundred and fifty meters off, guarded by a policeman who kept himself warm by marching up and down on the towpath. She was an old motorless barge —an *écurie*, or stable, as they call the boats that ply mainly on the canals and keep their horses on board. Passing cyclists looked round at this grayish hull that all the newspapers had been full of for the last two days.

As usual when everyone else had failed to uncover anything new, Chief Inspector Maigret was called in. Everyone concerned had been engaged on the inquiry, and the witnesses had already been interrogated fifty times, first by the police, then by the Corbeil detectives, the magistrates, and the reporters.

"You'll find Emile Gradut did it!" everybody kept telling him.

And Maigret, who had just questioned Gradut for two hours, had come back to the scene of the crime, and stood there, hands in the pockets of his thick overcoat, looking surly, smoking his pipe in little short puffs, staring at the sullen landscape as if he wanted to buy a plot there.

The interest lay not in the Coudray lock where the barge had been stranded, but at the other end of the reach, eight kilometers upstream at the Citanguette lock.

The same setting as down here, in short. The villages of Morsang and Seineport were on the opposite bank some distance away so that one saw only the quiet water fringed with trees and, here and there, the hollow of a disused sandpit.

But at Citanguette there was a bistro. The barges went to any lengths to lie there overnight. A real waterman's inn where they sold bread, tinned food, sausage, ropes, and oats for the horses.

It was there that Maigret really conducted his investigation, without seeming to, having a drink now and then, sitting by the stove, going for little strolls outside while the owner — a woman so fair she might almost have been an albino—watched him with respect tinged with irony . . .

This is what was known about the Wednesday evening.

Just as it was beginning to get dark, the *Eaglet*, a small tug from the upper Seine, had brought her six barges like chicks up to the Citanguette lock. At that time a fine rain was falling. When the boats had been moored, the men as usual had gathered at the bistro for a drink while

the lock-keeper was putting away his gear.

The *Astrolabe* appeared at the bend only half an hour later when darkness had already fallen. Old Arthur Aerts, the skipper, was at the helm, while on the path Claessens walked ahead of his horses, his whip on his shoulder.

Then the *Astrolabe* moored at the end of the line, and Claessens had taken his horses aboard. At the time nobody was paying any attention to them.

It was after seven o'clock, and everybody had already finished eating, when Aerts and Claessens entered the bistro and sat down beside the stove. The skipper of the *Eaglet* was holding forth, and the two had no need to say anything. The flaxen-headed innkeeper, a baby in her arms, served them four or five cheap brandies without paying much attention.

This, Maigret now understood, was the way of things here. They all knew one another, more or less. One entered with a casual greeting. One went and sat down without saying anything. Sometimes a woman came in, but it was to do her shopping for the next day, after which she would say to her husband, busy drinking, "Don't be too late coming back . . ."

It had been that way with Aerts's wife, Emma, who had bought bread, eggs, a rabbit.

And from this moment onward every detail became of the utmost importance, every piece of evidence was tremendously valuable. So Maigret was insistent. "You're sure that when he left, about ten o'clock, Arthur Aerts was drunk?"

"Blind drunk, as usual," the patronne answered. "He was a Belgian, after all. A good chap, really, who sat quietly in his corner and drank until he had only just enough strength to get back on board."

"And Claessens, the stableman?"

"It took more than that to make him drunk. He stayed about another quarter of an hour, then he left, after coming back to look for his whip which he had forgotten."

So far everything was going well. It was easy to picture the bank of the Seine at night below the lock, the tug at the head, the six lighters behind her, then the Aerts barge; on each boat a stable lantern and falling over it all, a fine steady drizzle.

About half-past nine Emma arrived back on board with her shopping. At ten Aerts got back in his turn, blind drunk as the woman in the bistro had said. And at a quarter past ten the stableman finally made for the *Astrolabe*.

"I was only waiting for him to go to close up, for the watermen go to bed early, and there was no one else left."

So much for what was tangible and reliable.

From then on there was not a scrap of exact information. At six in the morning the skipper of the tug was amazed that the *Astrolabe* was

no longer to be seen behind his lighters, and a few moments later he noticed that the mooring lines had been cut.

Just then the Coudray lock-keeper, tending his wife, heard the shouts of the old stableman, and shortly afterward found the barge grounded against his weir.

The dog on the deck was loose. The stableman, who had just been wakened by the impact, knew nothing, and claimed that he had been asleep all night with the horses as usual.

But, aft in the cabin, Aerts had been found hanged, not with a rope but with the dog's chain. Then, behind a curtain that screened off the washbasin, his wife Emma was found hanged—in her case with a sheet pulled off the bed.

And this was not all: when he was on the point of sailing, the skipper of the tug *Eaglet* called in vain for his engineer, Emile Gradut, and found he had disappeared.

"It was Gradut who did it." Everyone was agreed, and that evening the newspapers had headings like:

Gradut Seen Prowling Near Semeport
Manhunt in the Forest of Rougeau
Aerts Savings Still Missing

For all the statements confirmed that old Aerts had a nest egg, and everyone even agreed on the amount —one hundred thousand francs. Why? It was quite a story—or, rather, it was very simple. Aerts, who was sixty and had two grown-up sons, married, had taken Emma as his second wife; and Emma, from Strasbourg, was only forty.

Now, things weren't going at all well with them. At every lock Emma complained about the meanness of the old man, who barely gave her enough to eat on.

"I don't even know where he keeps his money," she used to say. "He wants it to go to his sons if he should die . . . And *I* have to kill myself looking after him, steering the boat, to say nothing of . . ." She would go into cynical detail, to Aerts's face if need be, while Aerts stubbornly confined himself to shaking his head.

Only after she had gone he would murmur, "She only married me for my hundred thousand francs. But she'll be diddled."

Or Emma would say, "As if his sons needed it to live."

In fact, the elder, Joseph, was skipper of a tug in Antwerp, and Theodore, assisted by his father, had bought a fine motor launch, the *Marie-France*, which had just been reached on its way to Maastricht in Holland.

"But I'll find them, his hundred thousand francs . . ." She would tell you this without thinking, even if she had known you for only five minutes; she would give you the most intimate details about her old husband, and would then conclude cynically, "All the same, he doesn't imagine it was for love that a young woman like me . . ."

And she was deceiving him. The evidence was indisputable. Even the skipper of the *Eaglet* knew all about it.

"I am only telling you what I know . . . But without a doubt during the fortnight we were lying idle at Alfortville, and while the *Astrolabe* was loading, Emile Gradut often used to go and see her, even in broad daylight."

So?

Emile Gradut, who was twenty-three, was a rat, that was clear. Actually, he had been arrested twenty-four hours later, starving in the forest of Rougeau less than five kilometers from Citanguette.

"I haven't done anything!" he screamed at the policemen as he tried to ward off the blows.

An unhealthy little lecher, repellent, whom Maigret questioned for two hours in his office, and who had repeated obstinately, "I haven't done anything."

"Then why did you clear off?"

"That's my business!"

As for the examining magistrate, who was sure that Gradut had hidden the money in the forest, he had the place combed again, without result.

There was something infinitely dreary about all this, like the river which reflected the same sky from morning to night, like the string of boats that announced their presence with hooters—one blast for each barge under tow—and which were endlessly edging their way in and out of the lock. Then, while the women on the deck, busying themselves with the kids, kept an eye on the barges, the men went up to the bistro, had a quick drink, and came back with heavy tread.

All crystal clear, one of his colleagues had said to Maigret. And yet Maigret, surly as the Seine itself, as a canal in the rain, had come back to his lock and couldn't tear himself away again.

It's always the same thing: when an affair appears to be clear nobody thinks of going deeper into the details. For everyone it was Gradut who had done it, and he looked so much the type who might that this in itself was taken as evidence.

Notwithstanding, there were now the results of two post-mortems, which produced some strange conclusions. Thus, for Arthur Aerts, Dr. Paul said, "Slight contusion under chin . . . From the degree of rigor mortis and the contents of the stomach can state that death by strangulation took place between ten and ten thirty."

Now, Aerts had come back on board at ten. According to the albino-blonde patronne, Claessens had followed him a quarter of an hour later, and Claessens had stated that he had gone straight to bed.

Was the light on in the Aerts's cabin?

"I don't know."

Was the dog loose?

The poor old man had thought for a long time, only to end with a help-

less gesture. No, he didn't know . . . He hadn't noticed . . . Could he possibly have foreseen that his doings on that particular evening would become of prime importance after the event? He was half-seas-over. He was sleeping fully dressed on the straw, in the pungent odor of the horses.

"Didn't hear anything? Anything at all?"

He didn't know, he couldn't have known! He was asleep, and when he woke up he found himself in mid-stream, up against the weir.

There was another piece of evidence, but could it be relied on? It was by Madame Couturier, the wife of the skipper of *Eaglet*. The chief inspector at Corbeil had questioned her as well as the others before letting the convoy proceed on its way toward the Loing canal. Maigret had the transcript in his pocket.

Question: You heard nothing during the night?

Answer: I wouldn't like to swear that.

Q: Tell me what you heard.

A: It's so hazy . . . At one time I woke up and I looked at the time on the alarm clock. It was a quarter to eleven. It seemed to me that someone was talking near the boat.

Q: You didn't recognize the voices?

A: No. But I thought it was Gradut having a rendezvous with Emma. I must have gone back to sleep straight away.

Could one rely on this? And even if it were true, what did it prove?

Below the dam, a tug, its six barges, and the *Astrolabe* had been moored for the night, and . . .

The report on Aerts was clear: he had died by strangulation between ten and ten thirty. But the story grew complicated with the second of Dr. Paul's reports, the one that referred to Emma.

The right cheek bore traces of bruising caused either by a blunt instrument or by a violent blow from a fist. As to the time of death—caused by hanging—it must have been about one a.m.

And here was Maigret, sinking deeper and deeper into the slow, heavy way of life of Citanguette, as if it was only there that he could think. A motor launch flying Belgian colors made him think of Aerts's son, who must by now have arrived in Paris.

The Belgian colors made him think, too, of the gin. For, on the table in the cabin, a gin bottle had been found, more than half empty. The cabin itself had been ransacked from top to bottom: even the mattress had been ripped open, and the stuffing was spread all round.

All this, of course, in a search for the savings. Those who had been first on the scene were saying, "It's all very simple. Emile Gradut killed Aerts and Emma. Then he got drunk and hunted for the money, and now he's got it hidden in the forest."

But there was one difficulty: Dr. Paul's post-mortem on Emma re-

vealed that *she* had drunk all the gin.

Well, so what? Then it was Emma who drank the gin, and not Gradut.

Perfectly clear, was the answer. Gradut, having killed Aerts, got his wife drunk so as to have the upper hand more easily—for you remember she was a strong woman.

If you believed that story, Gradut and his mistress had both stayed aboard from ten or half-past, when Arthur Aerts died, until midnight or one in the morning, when Emma died . . .

It was possible, of course . . . anything was possible. But Maigret wanted—it was hard to put into words—he wanted to come round to "thinking bargee"—that's to say, to thinking as the barge folk did.

He had been quite as hard as the others on Gradut. For two hours he had kept grilling him. To begin with he had used the same old velvet-glove line, as they call it at Headquarters. "Now, listen to me, my boy, you're mixed up in this, that's obvious. But, frankly, I don't believe you killed them both."

"I didn't do anything!"

"All right, you didn't kill them. But own up, you pushed the old man round a bit. It was his own fault, after all—he disturbed you, so in self-defense you—"

"I didn't do anything!"

"As for Emma, of course you wouldn't have touched her, seeing she was your mistress."

"You're wasting your time—I didn't do anything!"

Then Maigret got tougher, even threatening. "Ah, so that's the way it is. Well, we'll see once you're on the boat with the corpses."

But Gradut had not flinched at the prospect of a reconstruction of the crime. "Whenever you like. I didn't do anything."

"Wait till they find the money you've got stowed away."

At that Emile Gradut had smiled, and it was such a pitying, superior smile . . .

That evening there were only two boats lying at Citanguette, a motor launch and an *écurie*. Below, at the weir, a policeman stood sentry on the deck of the *Astrolabe;* he was very surprised when Maigret climbed aboard, saying, "I haven't time to go back to Paris. I'll sleep here."

You could hear the soft lapping of the water against the hull; then the policeman, who was afraid of falling asleep, started marching up and down the deck. He, poor man, soon began to wonder if Maigret had gone mad, for he was making as much noise down there all by himself as if the horses had been let loose in the hold.

"Tell me, young man . . ." It was Maigret emerging from the hatchway. "You couldn't find me a pickax?"

Find a pickax, at ten at night, in a place like this! However, the policeman woke the lock-keeper with the mournful look. And the lock-

keeper had a pickax that he used in his garden.

"What's that Inspector of yours going to do with it?"

"I haven't the faintest . . ."

As for Maigret, he went back to the cabin with his pickax and for the next hour the policeman heard muffled blows.

"Look, young man . . ."

It was Maigret again, sweating and puffing, who stuck his head through the hatch. "Go and make a phone call for me. I want the examining magistrate to come over first thing tomorrow morning, and he is to have Emile Gradut brought along . . ."

Never had the lock-keeper looked so lugubrious as when he piloted the magistrate toward the barge, while Gradut followed between two policemen. "No, I swear to you, I don't know anything . . ."

There was Maigret, fast asleep on Aerts's bed. He didn't even make any excuse; he gave the impression of not noticing the magistrate's amazement at the state of the cabin. The floor had, in fact, been torn up. Under this floor there was a layer of cement, but this had been shattered by great blows from a pickax; it was complete chaos.

"Come in, sir. I went to bed very late, and I haven't yet had time to tidy myself up." Maigret lit his pipe. Somewhere he had found some bottles of beer, and he poured himself a glass.

"Come in, Gradut. And now . . ."

"Yes," the magistrate said, "and now . . .?"

"It's very simple," Maigret said, sucking at his pipe. "I'm going to explain what happened the other night. You see, there's one thing that struck me from the start: old Aerts was hanged with a chain, and his wife was hanged with a sheet."

"I don't see—"

"You will. Look through all the police records and I swear you won't find one case—not one single one—of a man who hanged himself using a wire or a chain. It's strange, perhaps, but it's true. Suicides tend to be soft, more or less, and the idea of the links biting into their necks and pinching the skin . . ."

"So Arthur Aerts was murdered?"

"That's my conclusion, yes. Especially as the bruise on his chin seems to prove that the chain—which was thrown over his head from behind while he was drunk—first struck his face—"

"I don't see—"

"Wait! Next you should note that his wife, for her part, was found hanged with a twisted sheet from the bed. Not even a rope, though on board a boat there are plenty of them. No—a sheet from the bed, which is about the nicest way of hanging oneself, if I may put it like that."

"Which means what?"

"That she hanged herself. Obviously she did, because to give herself

courage she had to swallow half a liter of gin—she who never drank at all. Remember the doctor's report."

"I remember."

"So, one murder and one suicide; the murder committed at about a quarter past ten, the suicide at midnight or one o'clock in the morning. From then on everything begins to get simple."

The magistrate was looking at him with some distrust, Emile Gradut with ironic curiosity.

"For a long time now," Maigret continued, "Emma, who didn't get what she wanted by her marriage to old Aerts, and who was in love with Emile Gradut, had been haunted by one idea: to get hold of the old man's savings and go off with her lover.

"Suddenly she has the chance. Aerts comes home in a very drunken state. Gradut is only a few steps away, aboard the tug. She has seen, on going to make her purchases at the bistro, that her husband is already well on the way to being drunk. So she unchains the dog and waits with the chain all ready to slip round the old man's neck."

"But—" the magistrate objected.

"All in good time. Let me finish. Now Aerts is dead . . . Emma, drunk with triumph, runs to get Gradut, and here don't forget that the tug skipper's wife hears voices at a quarter to eleven. Is that right, Gradut?"

"That's right!"

"The two of them come back on board to look for the savings, search everywhere, even in the mattress, and don't find the hundred thousand francs. Is that right, Gradut?"

"That's right!"

"Time passes, and Gradut grows impatient. I bet he even starts wondering if he hasn't been hoaxed, wondering if the hundred thousand francs really exists. Emma swears it does. But what's the use of that, if it isn't discovered? They start searching again. Gradut has had enough. He knows he will be accused—he wants to be off. Emma wants to go with him."

"Excuse me, but—" the magistrate murmured.

"Later! As I was saying, she wants to be off with him, and, as he has no wish to be encumbered with a woman who hasn't even any money, he gets out of it by punching her on the jaw. Then, once he's on shore, he cuts the mooring ropes of the barge. Is that right, Gradut?"

This time Gradut was slow to reply.

"That's almost all there is," Maigret concluded. "If they had discovered the money, they would have gone off together, or they would have tried to make the old man's death look like suicide. As they didn't find it, Gradut, scared out of his wits, roams around the countryside trying to hide.

"As for Emma, she comes to find the boat drifting on the current, and the corpse swinging beside her. No hope left. Not even a chance of getting away . . . Claessens would

have to be wakened to pole the boat along . . . Everything's gone wrong. And she, in turn, decides to kill herself. Only she hasn't enough courage, so she takes a drink, chooses a soft sheet from the bed . . ."

"Is that right, Gradut?" the magistrate asked, watching the wretch.

"Since the Inspector says so . . ."

"But wait a moment . . ." the magistrate retorted. "What is there to prove that he didn't find the savings, and that, just to keep the money . . .?"

At that Maigret merely stretched out a foot and pushed away some pieces of cement, revealing a neat hiding place containing Belgian and French gold coins. "Now you understand?"

"Almost," the magistrate murmured, without conviction.

And Maigret, refilling his pipe, grumbled, "One ought to have known in the first place that the bottoms of old barges are repaired with cement . . . Nobody told me that."

Then, with a sudden change of tone, "The best of it is that I've counted it, and it does in fact amount to one hundred thousand francs . . . Queer kind of couple, don't you think?"

NEXT MONTH . . .

***BRAND-NEW* detective *SHORT NOVEL*—complete!**

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG's *The Second Commandment*

We have often wondered how many different types of short story Gerald Kersh has written—we doubt if there is any type at all that he hasn't put his special literary mark on. EQMM has been proud to publish a wide variety of Gerald Kersh's short stories—but here is one that is different from all the others . . .

A GAME PLAYED IN THE TWILIGHT

by GERALD KERSH

HEARING FRENZIED FOOTSTEPS and a hooting of predatory boys, the old lady came out of her quiet little house, leaning on a light hickory stick with a silver band under the handle. She could detect one boy running nimbly ahead of the rest and knew, by his breathing, that he was in some distress.

So she waited until the hunted boy was in the shadow of her porch and his pursuers were given voice. She paused listening; then smiled; and came into the open, brandishing her stick and calling the boys by name almost playfully as she struck at them, "Oh, your back, Charlie Lygoe—your back, your back! Oh, poor Jack Sparrow—your legs, your legs! Oh your arm, John Cotton, your poor arm!"

They fled, terrified. Her stick stung, but her voice bit deep; and there was something especially frightening in the way the pale-eyed gentlewoman called her blows.

Now she turned to the boy who had been running away.

"What did you run away for?"

"They wanted this pie, ma'am."

"So you ran?"

"Yes'm—" he was urgent in his own defense "—I can run rings around 'em. I did not run for fear. I had this pie to bring to you. I figured I might wind Charlie Lygoe and the others, then fight it through, ma'am, and save this pie."

"Good boy. And what would you've done if they had caught you, eh?"

"Ate some of the pie, slapped the rest in Jack Sparrow's face, and run again."

"And what about Charlie Lygoe?"

"Oh, he'd be down, and then there would be only one by the time Jack Sparrow got the pie out of his eye. So I would have tackled John Cotton, and anyone can handle *him*."

"Good. I like you. You will go far, lad."

The boy asked, breathless again, "Are you telling my fortune, ma'am?"

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"Fortunes cut two ways," said the old lady, laughing. "Everybody goes far, don't you see—up to heaven or down to t'other place."

"Yes'm."

It would have been inaccurate to call this old woman tender in her manner—tenderized is the word for her, as for strong flesh rendered soft by hard knocks and the passage of time. She was much feared in Troy Grove, Illinois, because it was believed that Mama Fixum, as she was called, had the gift of second sight. She looked as if through a film of skimmed milk, yet you sensed that she was aware of your every movement, even of your change of expression. Certainly, for a blind woman, Mama Fixum was fantastically perceptive.

She was supposed to go abroad at night when she should have been sleeping and not walking; but if she was, as rumor had it, a witch, her magic was of the white sort that heals but does not hurt and lays no curses; and for her blessings she made no charge to rich and poor alike.

Still, to be on the safe side, the housewives of Troy Grove used to send her cakes and jars of preserves with their compliments and kindest regards, while their husbands raised their hats to her in the street. At all events, they said, old Mama Fixum is a lady.

All the same, they crossed their fingers behind her back when she passed, tapping with her little stick; because hers had been no ordinary life.

She knew every one of the children of the neighborhood—even if they did not speak—by the way they moved, so that now, when the awkward boy came into her house with the pumpkin pie, Mama Fixum dilated her nostrils, delicately sniffing its aroma, and extending a bony but sensitive hand explored the boy's head.

"Aye, aye," she muttered, "many a girl would give more than she ought for that cornsilk hair and cheeks like warm peaches! Set you down, little Jimmy, and I'll give you a glass of rhubarb wine and some of my own little cakes. And thanks very kindly for the pie. I'll give you a jug of my old elderberry wine to take home to your good people because it is a specific for the fever."

The boy shrank back a little—there was something frightening in the smooth face of the old lady and in the knowledgeable touch of her fingertips. He had an awful vision of something older than Time—a brain activated by ten eyes at the ends of stalks.

Swallowing fright, he asked, boldly, "I wonder what it feels like to be blind?"

"It depends on what a person means by seeing," said Mama Fixum, with a little laugh. "I've been well nigh blind near on to sixty years. Now you have lived all of ten years, Jimmy, with the full use of your eyes. Look at me, sweetheart,

and tell me what you see. Do, now! And I'll wager that I can see more of you blind than you can see of me with your bright eyes. Now then! What do you see?"

Jimmy did not know how to answer, so he asked, "If you please, ma'am, why do they call you Mama Fixum?"

She laughed. "Well done, child. When at a loss to answer a question, ask another and play for time. My real name, boy, is Phoebe Fiscombe; but names get altered according to the convenience of the vulgar. It is easier to say Fixum than Fiscombe. Thus Cholmondeley is pronounced Chumley, and Featherstonhaugh is pronounced Fanshaw. My grandfather was Sir Charles Fiscombe, child, who came to this country in 1758 from Devonshire in England. That was nearly a hundred years ago—if, as you should, you know your additions and subtractions—this being the year of Our Lord 1850. Playing and fighting were my grandfather's ruin."

The boy said gravely, "I like playing. Mama Fixum, but they won't let me play with them. And I'm not afraid to fight, you know, only they laugh at me because I've got thin wrists—"

"Bah! Do you think I am talking of playing for marbles or whatnot, or fighting with your knees and elbows in the dust? Mercy, no! I speak of the cards and the dice—*écarté*, faro, ombre, piquet, and *poque* or, as they call it now, poker; and with the dice, hazard and the game of seven. Fighting was with the sword or pistol. The stakes were gold on the table, or blood in the field.

"They were men, child, men! But thank God you are half a girl, by the touch of you, and may one day be a minister; because gamblers die in poverty, and he who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword."

"I don't want to be any pasty-faced minister," the boy said.

"You hush now, little Jimmy! My grand-uncle Amyas, my grandfather's youngest brother, was vicar of Fiscombe, and they tell me there never was a heartier man nor a harder rider to hounds in the whole of the country of Devon; and if he could not bring a parishoner to grace with soft words, my grand-uncle Amyas took him by the scruff of the neck and beat the fear of the Lord into him with a stout stick—and drank his four bottles of wine at dinner. Pasty-faced, indeed!"

"Mama Fixum, tell me about your grandfather. And is it true you shot an outlaw? And is it right what they say, you were stolen by the Injuns? And can you really read fortunes—"

"All that and more, child, all that and more," replied the old lady, laughing. "But one thing at a time. My grandfather, Sir Charles Fiscombe, was a fine man, but gaming was his downfall—high play and quick temper. They don't mix. So he fought a duel with young Lord Millis Hills, the son of the Earl, over a disputed hand at cards, and

shot him dead in the dawn; therefore, he left England. For it was a saying, d'you see, that a Fiscombe never needed to fire twice at the same man, on account of a trick so simple that a born baby knows it . . . But these are not matters for little ears, so run along with you, boy Jimmy."

"What was the trick, Mama Fixum? Please tell me, please do!"

"Hm! You have a charm to unlock my tongue and steal my brains away, I see. Watch me clever and close—maybe this trick will stand you in good stead one of these cool evenings. Who can tell? Now, child, poor blind me, I can see little more than your outline. But where is my finger pointing?"

"At my breast, Mama Fixum."

"So! Now, you point your forefinger at something in this room; hold that finger steady—don't move, now—and take a sight down that finger. Well, what have you drawn a bead on?"

"That candlestick, ma'am."

"Imagine, now, that your index finger was the barrel of a pistol and your middle finger was the trigger finger. Your thumb, d'you see, holds the hammer back at full cock while your middle finger has the trigger down as far as it will go. The pointing finger is doing the aiming, so all you want to do is lift your thumb, keeping right steady, and your ball will go exactly where the finger points, even in the half dark.

"That was my grandfather's trick, and he died, rest his soul, of overreliance on it, for after a game of faro he challenged a Spanish gentleman in Virginia. The challenged party has choice of weapons. The Spanish gentleman chose swords and ran my grandfather through at the second pass; for it takes an eye to be a swordsman—whereas anyone can shoot like poor blind me—and all my family were weak in the eyes. Take another cake and run along."

"And what about your father and how you were captured by the Injuns? And how did you shoot the outlaw?"

"Well, my grandfather died middling prosperous, and my dear father inherited the property, including four cases of pistols and the Fiscombe Curse which was a passion for play, whether with cards or dice. Sweetheart, better be born in a ditch with nothing, than in a palace with a lust to gamble! My mother was a Wyndham and she brought him twenty thousand dollars, but it all went—and so did he go.

"Died in a duel, pistols across a handkerchief, shot by a gentleman named Scudder. Witnesses opined that Scudder pulled his trigger a little too soon, but it was too late to argue. My honored father fired his shot while he was down on his knees and, as I told you, a Fiscombe never shoots twice at the same target if it be human. Both perished simultaneously. Let this be a lesson to you."

"And can you really read the future, Mama Fixum?"

"Good gracious, yes, my dear! Did you ever carry keys in your pocket?"

"Yes'm."

"You know by the feel which key opened what door?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"The key carried its own future with it, then, didn't it now?"

"Yes, Mama Fixum. How did you kill the outlaw, you being . . . not very well able to see?"

"Why, Jimmy, that person murdered my husband and there was nobody in all the world to hunt him down. They called him Wild Bull Chase and he was a bad man. He shot my husband in the back with a rifle, having lost a thousand dollars to him. For my husband—oh, dear me, how long ago!—was also a Fiscombe, because he was my cousin three times removed. But all the world was afraid of Wild Bull Chase. Wild Bull by name, and wild bull by nature. He was the man that shot Bad Al Kohler and Red Ned Kelly. Our men were out after the Injuns mostly, in those days."

"But I heard, Mama Fixum, that you lived years and years with the Injuns."

"Ah, child, there's not much you miss! Time of the Massacre I was a little girl and, surely enough, the Injuns did carry me away."

"Did they torture you?" the boy asked eagerly.

"Torture me? Bless your heart, not they! You see—I won't give you the right words for it, because that would take half the day, and it's high time you were home—there was a kind of politics. The Injuns let some white prisoners live while we let some Injun prisoners live. Diplomacy, it is called. It was in case both sides wanted to make a peaceful exchange of prisoners, one against the other. So it came to pass I lived five years with the Injun women. And many a thing they taught me of herbs and medicines. One thing above all I learned—"

"Tell me how you killed that Wild Bull Chase, Mama Fixum."

"By learning what I'm trying to tell you, young fellow. By learning two of the hardest things in the world—namely, how to keep dead quiet and how to keep dead still. The fools that were about in my time used to think the Injuns were devils. Nothing of the sort, child. The Lord tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, it's true, but the lamb must have his nose to the wind, because the Lord helps those that help themselves.

"Watch sun and wind, Jimmy, and you can see to kill through milk; aye, though you can't read your Bible at twelve inches, guard your position and you'll be deadly against an eagle. The whole trick of invisibility, Jimmy, is to keep your head down, get close to something pretty nigh your own color, and let every bone in your body go limp and stay limp. For this reason panthers were made with spots, and some insects like unto leaves.

"If it ain't a bird you are fighting, bear this in mind, and keep your back plumb in the eye of the sun. A good target, you say? So you are, if the other man knows how to hood his eyes. But then he is at a disadvantage, because you can see him a sight clearer than he can see you, and the chances are five to two he'll miss you by a foot. Then *he* is at *your* mercy.

"He must fire again, so play Injun —keep still until he begins to reload, and while his eyes are down on his charge, edge closer; then, when he's aiming to sight a hundred paces behind you, spring up and confront him, and let him have it. But never forget, Jimmy honey, the forefinger along the barrel, the hammer back, and the trigger pulled with the middle finger. Let your thumb go and no human speed will match the fall of the hammer with the snick of the spring. Now be off home with you."

The child persisted, "I want to know how you killed Wild Bull Chase, Mama Fixum."

"You take back that little jug of elderberry wine for the fever, child. You can have another cake, if you like. And don't go sipping my elderberry on the way home, because it is not for boys—only for ladies with the fever. Two nice big glasses at bedtime also cures the nightmare."

She shook her head and said to herself, "Any excuse is better than none for the poor dears; put whiskey in a medicine glass and they'd drink thirty ounces a day for their stomachs and blame the hiccups on their husbands."

"Yes," said the boy, "but you didn't tell me how you killed Wild Bull Chase."

"Oh, bless the child! You don't know that you open a sore old wound, silky-haired little Jimmy. But Lord lend us patience! It happened like this. My good husband Digby, when the game of cards reached its end, put down a pair of aces and a pair of eights against Wild Bull Chase's aces and threes, and thereby legitimately won a thousand dollars. Wild Bull Chase got up in a huff and walked out of the Grove Tavern.

"It was a warm night and the door was open and my husband, they told me, was sitting with his back to the door. He wanted, you see, the benefit of the extra moonlight on his cards, being near-sighted like all us Fiscombes. Digby said good night to the other players and—he being never a man to come home, bless his heart, at a given time—sat in his place dealing himself imaginary hands; with the lamplight over him and the moonlight white on his back.

"Then, all of a sudden, my husband went forward as if a sledgehammer had struck him and fell on the table with a bullet in his back. A second or so later, people heard the sounds of the shot that had killed him. Oh, for your health's sake, Jimmy, never sit down with your back to an open door!

"If somebody had robbed my poor husband, suspicion might have fallen on Wild Bull Chase; then, no doubt, a few men would have taken out after him and searched him for money, and hanged him up if they had found it. But here was no occasion to rouse the town without evidence. Chase was known, everybody said, as a hand-gun fighter and not a rifleman. There was no evidence against Wild Bull Chase, man-killer though he was. Also, there was not much law in the land, then, and Chase had an elegant horse and a decent start.

"When they brought my man home, looking so quiet, whom everybody praised now in his death who had disliked him so much in his lifetime because they feared him, I put my hand on his marble forehead, and swore to his cold clay, 'Digby, lie still and rest; you shall be avenged!'

"The women here said I was unnatural because I did not cry. Poor girls, I had learned in a bitterer school than they. Work first, then cry; and let your face go to pieces before strangers? No. Grief is yours alone. I left Digby decently covered with a sheet and looked over the terrain where he had been shot. There was a dark mark on the floor and a lead ball only half buried in the table, where there were some scattered cards.

"Now, remembering what I knew of angles and woodcraft, it seemed to me that the shot must have been fired from Soo Hill, three hundred yards away as the crow flies; whoever shot my husband Digby must have been acting out of pure meanness, giving way to the temptation Digby's fine broad back must have offered in the lamplight and the moonlight.

" 'I will find that man and he shall die in his tracks,' I vowed, and I went back home.

"And here was waiting a committee of ladies and gentlemen to commiserate with me, but I begged them to be gone and leave me alone, for pity's sake, with my dead. We used to have two house servants. One was a Negro slave called Tarheel—a fine carpenter and cabinet-maker; the other was a white bondswoman called Vidler.

"When everyone else was gone, Tarheel said to me, 'Miz Fixum, I was up on Soo Hill huntin' for rabbit, and I distinkly seen that bad Wild Bull genamum draw a bead on Massa Fixum, framed like a picture-painting in the doorway. There weren't no way to stop 'im, me being so high up the hill, but I'd 'a throwed a rock at his hoss if I'd found one to hand.

" 'And before I could even cotch a breff to yell, he was gone. But I seen which way he headin'.' And this Negro, weeping, says, 'I am not by law 'lowed to bear testimony 'gainst no white man, but I sure is 'lowed by law to hang by the neck. And I will surely, with yo' leave, follow that Wild Bull Chase to the end of the

world for the sake o' Massa Fixum!'

"At this, containing myself, I said, 'Thank you, I take the will for the deed. And for this piece of bravery, Tarheel, you shall have your freedom and your own carpenter's shop. Load me the long English pistols and I'm after Wild Bull Chase, alone. Load me the pair, choose the balls well, and let them be right, or I'll switch you with a hickory branch until it is bare of twigs!'

"Well, then, I changed my skirts for trousers and my shoes for moccasins; for what I had to do was not work for petticoats. But now the bondswoman Vidler must have her say. And she says, 'Nay, mistress, but I'll not let thee. Have I not two strong hands and two good legs and a pair of sharp eyes? While thee, poor lady, has but weak eyes. And thee must not kill, nor bear arms even. Nay, mistress, let me find him and bring the good folk to judge him and spare thee the sin of—'

"I told her, 'Watch your dead master, but for what you have this minute felt, you shall have freedom from bond and a dowry to marry a good husband. And mark you, you two,' says I, looking to my pistols and putting them into my sash, 'do you not see that Wild Bull Chase's benefit is also my advantage? He has the eye of a wolf, while I see only in a milky twilight. He must be traveling westwards; and I shall follow him this night and tomorrow—at a distance—until the evening comes down. Then we will see who stands on stronger ground! This is a game played in the twilight—and woe betide the man who meets a Fiscombe on his own terms!'

"Tarheel said, 'Massa Chase surely was headin' westward, Mix Fixum —on a right good hoss.'

"I told him, and here's the truth, 'There never was a living horse could run down man or woman in distance; it is the brain that counts; otherwise, how could a tame horse loaded with man and saddle round up wild horses?'

"Then, weeping, 'Let me get thee some food to pack and a bottle of cold tea,' says Vidler, but I tell her that neither bite nor sup do I touch until Wild Bull Chase is dead—"

"Mama Fixum, oughtn't you to have took something to eat and drink?" the boy interjected.

"No, because I had vowed my vow in another place, and I would eat lead and drink smoke before I broke that vow. So I kept the eye of the sun, when it rose, at my back and held it there—until it was overhead—while I picked up tracks of man and horse, circling then, when the trail led to Thompson's Creek which lay close by Pick's Woods.

"It had to be so, of course, because Wild Bull Chase was a fugitive —only from his conscience—and even if the townfolks had been after him he must have seen their horses miles away on these prairies. That is why I was surer and safer alone, and on foot; though Chase was well mounted and armed with a rifle.

With this rifle, if I had been on horseback, he could have brought me down at five hundred paces. But I bided my time afoot, knowing where he had to go, which was to the water and wondering by what miracle the sun seemed to stand still in the sky—because if ever a morning and an afternoon lasted the whole six days of creation, this was it.

"You must understand, Jimmy boy, that I had to measure my light and my darkness in grains, like so much powder to carry a certain shot. There are two very hard shooting lights. Clear sunlight is a tricky one, but most treacherous of all is when the day marries the night; I mean, evening. Twilight is my light, yet I had to gauge how much light Wild Bull Chase needed to see by.

"So I crawled after him, knee and elbow, until he reached the creek. He thought he was alone, but I was only a hundred paces away. Wild Bull Chase lit no fire, but I could make out the figure of his horse. So I Injun-crawled to a dead locust tree, and with the pack thread I always kept in my pocket, lashed one of my pistols to a limb and bit the thread off short. Then I tied a fresh end to the trigger, cocked the pistol, and, ever so carefully crawled away, looping the thread in my hand around a smooth young sapling, until all the thread was paid out. And now I was no more than ten rods from Wild Bull Chase, with the evening sun going down and the thread in my hand.

"Here, naturally, was the time to draw Chase's fire because, don't you see, a flash gives a man no time to look, so there had to be light enough for him to see the curl of the smoke. Therefore, I pulled on my thread and the tied pistol went off with a bang that sent the birds screaming. The ball must have passed close enough to whine, for Wild Bull Chase was down behind his horse in an instant, and he sent his rifle bullet right in the direction of where my pistol was.

"Then he looked to his own pistols and reloaded his rifle—always with his eyes in the direction from which that shot had come—while I was twenty yards closer to him before he had that ball rammed home. Now here, Lord forgive me, here was something I never have stopped being proud of, for I had been moving so like an Injun that my hand closed on the scruff of the neck of a sleeping hare. *There* is moving quietly for you!

"I pitched that poor hare in Wild Bull Chase's line of vision, and she was away into the lengthening shadows in three bounds. But Chase fired at the sound and the shadow, while I crept nearer and nearer as he reloaded once again.

"I will do him this justice—he was not a coward. He tried to make himself small and crawled not backwards but forwards, little knowing that I was now less than fifteen paces behind him. But the wind changed suddenly and his horse

caught my scent and whinnied, so Chase turned with his rifle at his hip.

"Then I came up into sight, out of the grass, and said, 'Wild Bull Chase, I am the wife of the man you wantonly murdered. You have a cocked and loaded rifle in your hands and I have this pistol. Face to face, Chase, fire!'

" 'Are you all alone?' he asked.

" 'Yes,' said I.

" 'I don't fight women,' he said.

"But I knew by his false voice that his finger was on the trigger, and I threw myself sideways. He fired.

"His ball grazed my shoulder, but mine took him in the forehead, so that he fell down dead," said the old lady.

The boy asked avidly, "And what did you do then, Mama Fixum?"

"I turned him over with my foot and said to myself, 'Now I may weep for my husband.' And so I sat on the ground and I did. Then I mounted Wild Bull Chase's horse, because all the spirit had gone out of me, and rode back home, where I shamed them all by telling them that a half-blind young woman had hunted down and killed in fair fight this famous bad man. And there is the whole story, child, Take the jug and be off with you home."

"Mama Fixum, could I hold one of those pistols?"

"You may, child—indeed, there is only one left of that pair, the one I tied the thread to. The other I had buried with my husband. But it all seems a thousand years away . . . And this pistol here shall be buried with me, and much I care if they say it's the Injun in me!"

The boy hefted the weapon and then reluctantly hung it back up again over the fireplace.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'll come and cut your grass, Mama Fixum."

"Do, and I'll bake you a treat," the old lady said.

"Mama Fixum, will you read my future before I go?" the boy begged.

"Reading futures is for old women, child. Making futures is for young men. Give you advice, though—live by the gun and you'll die by the gun, live by the cards and you'll die by the cards, and never sit with your back to an open door. Now be off with you once and for all, for I'm tired of talking."

A number of other boys in various stages of ferocity were waiting for Jimmy when he came out in the hard-baked street. Their ringleader was fourteen years old and the biggest boy of his age in Troy Grove. He pulled Jimmy's long silken hair and, with an odiously awkward swagger and jeer, asked, "What's in that there jug, Jimmy boy?"

With a curious faraway look Jimmy closed the last three fingers of his right hand extended the forefinger, and cocked the thumb, saying, "If you ever do that again, Balfour Paltz, I'll kill you."

Unaccountably, the big boy was quelled—there was something stir-

ring in the other's face that made all his flesh go cold.

"See here, Jimmy boy—" he began.

"You know my name. I'll thank you to call me by it." His mind was moving rapidly; he liked the nickname Wild Bull, but he did not want to be called after a murderer who fired on blind women. Clearing his throat, he said, "My name is James Hickok, but from now on my personal friends may call me 'Wild Bill.'"

So the young Bill Hickok went home unmolested, carrying the jug of elderberry wine in his left hand. With the index finger of his right he pointed at an imaginary enemy and said, "Bang! You're dead!"

With one eye shut and the other half open he saw, as it might be framed in the sharp V of a gunsight, an acrid and smoky sector of a thunderous and bloody destiny.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	DATE
Ashford, Jeffrey	FORGET WHAT YOU SAW	Walker & Co.	$3.95	5/24
Christie, Agatha	MURDER IN OUR MIDST	Dodd, Mead & Co.	5.95	5/1
Creasey, John	MAKE-UP FOR THE TOFF	Walker & Co.	3.95	5/15
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Woods, Sara	LET'S CHOOSE EXECUTORS	Harper & Row	4.95	5/10

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE PAPERBACKS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	DATE
Ford, Leslie	THE DEVIL'S STRONGHOLD	Popular Library	.60	5/2
Marlowe, Stephen	DRUM BEAT—ERICA	Gold Medal (Orig.)	.50	4/27

Titles and Data Supplied by Publisher.

In our March 1967 issue (the 26th Anniversary Issue) we introduced Mr. Strang, high-school science teacher with a flair for crime detection. Here is Mr. Strang's second case, and it not only turns Mr. Strang into a series character but promises to give us one of the most interesting new detectives to appear in some time. For Mr. Strang's second case is not just an ordinary one: it concerns a dangerous and disturbing situation that surely must have occurred in many high schools—indeed, its implications are deep and many-sided, and extremely important not only to students and teachers but also to parents and administrators . . .

MR. STRANG PERFORMS AN EXPERIMENT

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

MR. STRANG STOOD BEHIND THE demonstration table, a satanic smile on his face, and held aloft the human skull in his hand. "Hugo, here," he said, pointing to the fleshless jaws, "was probably a rather young man. You will note that his teeth are in excellent condition—he undoubtedly brushed after every meal and saw his dentist twice a year."

Although one or two of the girls were turning a bit green, the twenty-eight students in Mr. Strang's biology class laughed dutifully. Mr. Strang smiled appreciatively in return. The thin science teacher had enough of the ham actor in him to play to an audience—even to a captive one—when the occasion presented itself.

The bell rang, ending the period. The students shifted restlessly but did not rise from their seats. They had learned early in the semester that in Mr. Strang's classes there was only one signal for dismissal. Mr. Strang took a long last look at the skull and murmured, "Alas, poor Yorick!"—while twenty-eight pairs of eyes stared fixedly at the black-rimmed glasses on the demonstration table.

Mr. Strang picked up his glasses and put them in his jacket pocket.

There was a scraping of chairs and a few minor skirmishes at the rear of the classroom as most of the students tried to get through the doorway at the same time. The man who was standing just outside the room, about to enter, was swept aside by the mass of teen-age humanity.

Finally the doorway cleared, and the man entered Mr. Strang's room.

Mr. Strang looked up, smiled, and placed the skull in a plastic bag on the table. "Come in, Russ," he said, "and I'll make you a cup of coffee. I've got a free period now, and my brew is better than that mud they make down in the Faculty Room."

Mr. Strang busied himself heating water over a Bunsen burner and arranging filter paper in a glass funnel. He spooned coffee into the filter-paper cone and poured boiling water over it, watching the brown liquid flow down the stem of the funnel and into the flask below it. Only when each had been provided with a beakerful of steaming coffee did Mr. Strang ask his question.

"What's bothering you, Russ?"

"It's—it's awful, Mr. Strang. I've got to talk to somebody. It just can't be happening to me. But how did you know about it? Did somebody tell you?"

"Coelenterata!" muttered Mr. Strang, making Phylum IV of animal classification sound like a wizard's magic word. "Russell Donato, do you take me for an idiot? You walk in here pale as a ghost, and with your hands shaking as if you had the St. Vitus's dance. And then while you wonder how I know you're worried, you keep gnawing at that thumbnail as if you want to leave nothing but a mashed stump. Now let's not beat around the bush. What's the trouble?"

"I've just come from Mr. Guthrey's office," said the younger man. "I've been suspended."

"Suspended? What do you mean?"

"Mr. Guthrey just handed me a thirty-day suspension. I can't teach here or anywhere else for the next month. Maybe never, for all I know."

Mr. Strang's jaw dropped. Although it was only the beginning of his second year at Aldershot High School, Russell Donato had the makings of an excellent chemistry teacher. He knew his field, he was a hard worker, and he had quickly learned to deal with his students without overstepping the thin line between friendliness and familiarity. The students not only liked him, they respected him, and to Mr. Strang, the second was far more important than the first. For Aldershot High School to lose him would be, in Mr. Strang's eyes, little short of a crime. He ran thin fingers through his rapidly disappearing hair.

"Why, Russ?" he asked.

"Because of Sheila Palinger," answered Donato.

"Who?"

"Sheila Palinger. She's a sophomore in my seventh-period study hall. She told Mr. Guthrey that I—well, she was in my room and—how do you say a thing like that, Mr. Strang?"

"She accused you of molesting her. Is that what you mean, Russ?"

"Yes. And now I've been suspended while the Board of Education makes its investigation."

Mr. Strang toyed for several sec-

onds with a glass rod on the table. "Did you do it, Russ?" he asked finally.

Donato turned suddenly. His face showed hurt and anger. "Of course not," he snapped. "What do you think I am?"

"That's what the Board of Education has thirty days to find out," said Mr. Strang. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Donato shrugged. "There's not much to tell," he said. "I was working late in my classroom yesterday, correcting some examination papers I wanted to give back this morning. About four o'clock Sheila Palinger walked in and asked me if I'd help her with some footnotes for an English term paper. I suggested that she see her English teacher, but she said everybody had gone home, and she needed the information right away."

"Does Sheila take chemistry?"

"No, she's majoring in art. Anyway, I wasn't too sure about footnoting myself, but I hauled out an old book I had on forms for written reports and found what she wanted. She wasn't in the room more than five minutes."

"But surely Mr. Guthrey knows that not much could have happened in five minutes."

"Mr. Strang, you ought to hear the story Sheila told. According to her, she spent almost half an hour in my room after school yesterday. And she sounded pretty convincing, believe me. She told things about the way the room looked that even I couldn't remember. But when I checked this morning, she was absolutely perfect—one hundred per cent. What was on my desk, the exact way the seats were arranged—everything."

Mr. Strang looked thoughtfully at the skull in its transparent bag. "Russ," he said finally, "I wouldn't worry too much about this. The principal and the Board aren't completely against you. But after all, an accusation has been made. You can't expect them to ignore it. Let me see what I can find out from Mr. Guthrey."

"But can they do this, Mr. Strang? Can they kick me out just on the word of one kid?"

"I'm afraid if it comes to a showdown, they can, Russ. You haven't got tenure yet, and until you get it, the Board of Education can suspend you or even fire you just because they don't like the style of shoes you wear or the color of your socks. But don't get too excited until I see Mr. Guthrey. Tell me one thing. Is there any reason why Sheila Palinger would make trouble for you?"

Donato shook his head. "None that I can think of," he said. "Oh, she's kind of a pain-in-the-neck in the study hall. Keeps coming up with idiotic questions about her work, hangs around my desk most of the period—things like that. But she's never made any real trouble. I just can't understand it."

"Well, Russ, don't be in too much of a hurry to leave the school. I may want to talk to you again later. But right now, I want to hear what Mr. Guthrey has to say."

As he went down the stairs toward the main office, Mr. Strang found it hard to keep the worried expression from his own face. In the outer office he passed the Lost and Found Box and noticed that a chemistry textbook topped the pile of misplaced articles. He walked through the door marked *Marvin W. Guthrey* without knocking, an action that was not likely to endear him to the principal of Aldershot High School, and sat stiffly in a chair in front of Guthrey's enormous desk.

Behind the desk Guthrey, a small man with a head of wavy, snow-white hair of which he was inordinately proud, was talking on the telephone. His eyebrows shot up in surprise at the sight of the science teacher.

"I'll call you back on this, Fred," he said into the phone, "or maybe we can talk about it just before the Board meeting. In the meantime I'll try to find out what I can at this end." The principal hung up the phone. "Now then, Mr. Strang," he said, turning in his swivel chair, "perhaps you can tell me the meaning of this. I'm not in the habit of having—"

"I'm here about Russ Donato," interrupted Mr. Strang.

"I suppose Donato has told you what the trouble is," said Guthrey, "so there's nothing more for me to add. Fred Landerhoff—he's on the Board of Education, you know—has been on the phone all morning. He just finished his fourth call to me when you walked in. He's the one who ordered me to suspend Donato."

"So what happens now, Mr. Guthrey? How do you go about finding out whether Donato is innocent or guilty?"

Guthrey let out a long breath. "I wish I knew, Mr. Strang," he said. "A situation like this is hard on everybody. As soon as word leaks out, I'm going to get a hundred calls asking why I hired Donato in the first place. Of course, if there's no proof of guilt, we'll keep Donato on—at least, until the end of the year. By that time, the good citizens of Aldershot will probably make it so hot for him that he'll have to leave."

"Shades of *Alice in Wonderland*," muttered Mr. Strang.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I was just thinking of Alice's trial, where the Red Queen says 'Sentence first—verdict afterwards.' The analogy seems to apply."

"Unfortunately, that's true. Words like 'perversion' and 'sex maniac' are going to be tossed around pretty carelessly. Donato will have a rough time finding another teaching job if we have to let him go. Oh, if he leaves, I'll write him a good recommendation, of course."

"Protozoa, Mesozoa, Porifera," growled Mr. Strang. His face turned an angry red. "Make up your mind. If he attacked the girl or did anything at all improper, he's not fit to be in a classroom—*any* classroom. If he didn't, give him a chance to defend himself. But don't hang the man on the unsupported testimony of a child."

Guthrey stuck out his chin belligerently. "Mr. Strang," he rumbled, "you burst in here without permission to question me about Donato. Taking into consideration your friendship with him as well as your years of service to the school, I overlooked this breach of the rules and decided to discuss the matter with you. But I do not intend to—to—"

Guthrey raised his hand dramatically and then let it fall slowly to the desk. "Oh, hell, Leonard," he said, looking sadly at the science teacher. "They've got me over a barrel. You know there isn't a chance in a thousand of getting any evidence. It's just Donato's word against Sheila's. And you won't find a parent in a thousand who thinks his child—his flesh and blood—would lie about a thing like this. The kids know it, and there are some—only a very few, fortunately—who are just waiting for the chance to take advantage of it."

Marvin Guthrey looked forlornly at Mr. Strang and seemed tiny and lost in his huge swivel chair. For the first time in many years the science teacher could find it in his heart to feel sorry for his principal.

There was a thick silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the wall. Then Mr. Strang banged his fist loudly on Guthrey's desk.

"No!" he shouted.

"What is it, Mr. Strang?" asked Guthrey.

"Are we going to let a man's reputation—his whole future—be ruined? Are we going to let the good name of this school be dragged through the mud, with every teacher afraid to be pleasant and helpful with his students because of the possible consequences? Are we all going to cringe every time some asinine accusation is made? No! No! No!" He pounded the desk three times to punctuate his last words.

Guthrey looked at the teacher as if he'd lost his senses. "But what can you do, Mr. Strang?" he asked, a worried look on his face.

"There must be some indication somewhere of what really happened yesterday, and we're going to find it. If Russ Donato is guilty, at least we'll have cleaned our own house. And if he's innocent—which I'm sure is the case—we'll serve notice that nobody can make such a bald accusation and get away with it. Mr. Guthrey, can you get somebody to take over my classes for the next couple of periods? Anybody in the department ought to be able to describe that skull as well as I can."

"What are you going to do?"

"We," said Mr. Strang, indicating Guthrey and himself, "are going to have a little talk with Sheila Palinger. She's still in the building, isn't she?"

Guthrey smiled wryly. "You must have passed Sheila and her mother when you came through the outer office," he said. "They were camped at my door when I got here this morning. I spent over an hour listening to them go on and on about Donato, and my secretary says they want to see me again as soon as I'm free. Between those two and Fred Landerhoff, I haven't had time to take a deep breath yet today." He spread his hands helplessly. "I don't know what I can tell them that they haven't already heard."

"You won't have to say a word, Mr. Guthrey," the teacher replied. "But if that girl's as big a liar as I think she is, I'd just as soon have a witness to what's said here during the next few minutes."

Mr. Guthrey called his secretary, and a few minutes later Sheila Palinger entered the office. She was wearing a simple cotton dress and a tragic expression that would have done credit to an actress playing Camille. Behind her came her mother, a look of self-pity on her face.

After the introductions had been made, Mr. Strang turned to the girl. "Sheila," he began, "according to Mr. Guthrey, you've made a rather serious charge against Mr. Donato. I wonder if you'd tell me about it."

"Sheila already told him everything," interruped Mrs. Palinger, indicating Guthrey with a jerk of her thumb, "and I gave Fred Landerhoff the whole story on the telephone last night. Fred's a good friend of mine. I can't see any sense in repeating it all and disturbing the child. I just want to find out what you're going to do about that —that *teacher.*"

"No, Mother," said Sheila. "I'll tell them. I want to cooperate in any way I can. I feel I owe it to my classmates and to the school."

Mr. Strang had all he could do to keep from shouting, "Academy Award!"

"What is it you want to know?" Sheila asked.

"Just tell us in your own words what happened, Sheila," said Mr. Strang in a kindly voice. "Right from the beginning."

"Well," Sheila began, her voice becoming low and confidential, "it was about five minutes to four yesterday. School had been out for almost an hour, and the halls were completely empty. I had some questions about an English assignment, and Mr. Donato was the only one I could find in the building, so I went to his room. He was there—alone."

"So nobody saw you go into the room?" asked Mr. Strang.

"Nobody," answered Sheila. "When I was inside, Mr. Donato asked me to sit down. He walked over to the windows and pulled

down the shades. I didn't know why at the time.

"While I was waiting, I noticed a pile of examination papers on Mr. Donato's desk. He had corrected about half of them. The paper on top had a mark of eighty. He also had a chemistry book propped open to page seventy-three."

Mr. Strang's eyes widened. The girl seemed to have total recall concerning all the details of the meeting. "Did you happen to notice the color of Mr. Donato's necktie?" he asked sarcastically.

"Oh, yes. It was blue, with little red squares on it. Each square had a white dot in the center. I thought it went well with his gray suit."

Mr. Strang couldn't even remember the color of the tie he was wearing today. He looked down to check. Brown, with green acid stains.

"Mr. Donato came over to my desk with a book," Sheila continued. "I remember thinking how dim the room was with the shades down and the lights out. But still I could see that gold college ring Mr. Donato wears, and I thought it was funny that the ring should shine in such a soft light.

"As he leaned over my desk to help me, he pointed to the book with one hand. But he kept brushing my hair very lightly with the fingers of the other hand."

And since he was leaning over the desk, he probably fell flat on his face, thought Mr. Strang, since he couldn't use either hand to prop himself up. But the science teacher remained silent.

"Pretty soon," the girl went on, "he closed the book and just stared into my eyes. I began to get a little frightened. But I didn't dare say anything. After all, Mr. Donato *was* a teacher. Then he said—he said—"

"What did he say?" Mr. Strang asked gently.

"He began telling me how—how lovely he thought I was—and how it meant so much to him to be alone with me. Then he began to touch me. He—he— Oh!" She buried her face in her hands.

Guthrey cleared his throat loudly. "And what did you do, Sheila?"

"I didn't know what to do, Mr. Guthrey. I remember getting up and backing away from Mr. Donato toward the door. Then I ran out."

"But you did remember to take your books, didn't you?" asked Mr. Strang.

"I must have. That part isn't too clear."

"You seemed to remember every little detail of what went on in the room before—er—anything happened."

Mrs. Palinger burst into the conversation. "That's not too unusual, is it? After all, the child's had a severe emotional upset. And now you two are almost acting as if you don't believe her."

Mr. Strang ignored the interruption. "Sheila," he said, "how long were you in Mr. Donato's room?"

"It must have been at least half an hour."

"Mr. Donato said that you were there no longer than five minutes."

"He's lying!" cried the girl. "Why, he even had time to do his old experiment before he started talking to me."

"Experiment?" said Mr. Strang. "I don't recall Mr. Donato saying anything about an experiment when he talked to me. What experiment was it, Sheila?"

"How should I know? I don't take chemistry. But anyway, he did it while I was there. That ought to prove I was in the room more than five minutes."

"But there was no sign this morning of any experiment having been done," said Guthrey.

"Hummph," snorted Mrs. Palinger. "He probably cleaned it all up before anybody saw it. Just the thing you'd expect of a snake like him."

"Do you remember anything about the experiment, Sheila?" asked Mr. Strang.

"Well, he had an iron stand on the table, and under it was one of those burners—"

"A Bunsen burner?"

"Yes, I guess so. There was this big glass thing like a bottle on the stand, and some tubes and—oh, I don't know. It's kind of hard to explain. It was like what you see in the mad-scientist movies. But I could draw you a picture of how it looked."

"Splendid," said Mr. Strang. He gave Sheila a pencil and a piece of paper from Guthrey's desk. The girl busied herself with them, and in a few minutes she showed the results to Mr. Strang.

If Sheila Palinger knew nothing about chemistry, she was an excellent artist. The picture showed a ring stand over a Bunsen burner. On the stand was a large flask with a rubber stopper in it. A glass tube and a funnel were stuck through holes in the stopper. At one side of the flask were two bottles. Although the labels on the bottles were visible, their small size in the drawing had made it necessary for Sheila to omit the printing on them. But the extreme realism of the sketch made it certain that Sheila had seen the experiment somewhere. Guthrey looked worriedly at Mr. Strang.

"Sheila," said the teacher, "About those two bottles. What was in them?"

"Let me see. Oh, yes. One of them had 'Hickle' on the label."

"Hickle?"

"Yes. And the other one was full of a black powder called 'Fess'."

"I never heard of 'Hickle' and 'Fess'," said Guthrey. "Mean anything to you, Mr. Strang?"

Mr. Strang's eyebrows narrowed in a frown. He reached into a pocket and dragged out a battered briar pipe and a pouch of tobacco. Ramming tobacco into the bowl of the pipe, he lit it and sent clouds of

smoke billowing into the small office. Guthrey and Mrs. Palinger wrinkled their noses disapprovingly, but Mr. Strang ignored them. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Several minutes passed, and Guthrey was just about to inquire if Mr. Strang was feeling all right when a smile spread over the face of the science teacher. He chuckled softly, and then not so softly. Soon he was emitting gales of laughter while his slender body shook with mirth.

"Hickle and Fess!" he gasped when he could catch his breath. "Sounds like a vaudeville team, doesn't it, Mr. Guthrey?"

"Let me in on it, Leonard," replied Guthrey. "What's so funny?"

Instead of answering, Mr. Strang took the drawing and made some rapid marks on the back of it with his pen. "Is this what you saw on the labels, Sheila?" he asked, showing her the paper.

"Yes, that's it."

Mr. Strang turned the paper so that Guthrey and Mrs. Palinger could see it. Printed on the paper in red ink were the two chemical symbols, HCl and FeS.

"'Hickle'—HCl," explained the teacher, "is the chemical symbol for hydrochloric acid. And FeS is ferrous sulfide. I'm afraid Sheila made words out of the chemical symbols."

"That still doesn't prove anything against her," said Mrs. Palinger. "Sheila couldn't be expected to know—she told you she doesn't take chemistry."

"No, she doesn't," Mr. Strang agreed. "Now then, Sheila, what did Mr. Donato do with the Hickle and Fess?"

"He mixed them together in the big bottle."

"It's called a flask, Sheila. What happened then—to the experiment, I mean?"

"Mr. Donato put it over the flame. But I don't remember anything else about it. That was when he started to—you know."

"I see," said Mr. Strang. "Well, you've been very helpful, Sheila, and I think we have a pretty good idea of what really happened. I wonder, though, if it would be possible for you to come back to school this evening—with your mother, of course—just to tie up a few loose ends. Say, about eight o'clock?"

Mother and daughter looked at one another and shrugged. "Eight o'clock will be all right," said Mrs. Palinger finally. "Just so long as Mr. Donato is dismissed from this school. The very idea of letting a man like that teach our children!"

"I assure you, Mrs. Palinger, that the entire truth of the situation will be brought to light this evening. And you mentioned Mr. Landerhoff on the Board of Education. Would you mind bringing him along? We'll be meeting in Mr. Donato's room."

"If it'll help get rid of that—that

monster, I'll see that Fred Landerhoff's there," replied Mrs. Palinger. She stood and patted her daughter's head lovingly.

"Until tonight, then," smiled Mr. Strang, holding the office door open.

When the Palingers had left, Guthrey leaned across his desk and scowled at Mr. Strang. "I hope you know what you're doing," he rumbled. "Parents, kids, a member of the Board—what's on your mind, Leonard?"

"You forgot one other person I'm inviting to the meeting," said the teacher.

"Who's that?"

"My principal. See you tonight at eight, Mr. Guthrey."

The gathering in Mr. Donato's science room that evening resembled a meeting between the legendary Hatfields and McCoys at the height of their feud. In one rear corner of the room sat Russ Donato. He was looking daggers at Sheila Palinger and her mother, who were sitting as far removed from the accused teacher as the walls of the room permitted.

In the center of the room Marvin Guthrey whispered nervously to Board member Landerhoff. From behind the demonstration table Mr. Strang grinned at his strange assortment of "students" like some diabolic gnome while he busily arranged the materials of the experiment Sheila Palinger had described earlier.

When he had completed his preparations, Mr. Strang rapped for order. An uneasy quiet descended on the room. "I believe you all know each other," he said, "so introductions will be unnecessary."

Fred Landerhoff raised his hand. Although he was here representing the Aldershot Board of Education, the sight of the thin science teacher in the front of the room made him feel like a schoolboy who didn't have his lesson prepared.

"This is highly irregular, Mr. Strang," he said. "I'd like to make it quite clear that I'm here at Mrs. Palinger's request. While I'm naturally interested in getting to the bottom of this incident, I'm here to see that—"

"We're all here to see that justice is done, Mr. Landerhoff," interrupted Mr. Strang, "and although the circumstances of this meeting are unusual, it's my opinion that recent events warrant it. I would like it noted, however, that the idea for the meeting was my own. Mr. Guthrey had no part in it."

The nervous principal let out a sigh.

"Today," Mr. Strang continued, "Mr. Donato was accused of—shall we say—making improper advances yesterday toward Miss Palinger, here. The school administration followed the only course of action open to it. Mr. Donato was suspended, pending an investigation."

Mr. Strang removed his glasses and polished them on his necktie.

Holding the glasses between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he examined them closely. Then he inserted his other hand deep into his left jacket pocket and leaned across the table, shaking the glasses at the group in front of him. He was ready to teach his "class."

"The difficulty in a situation like this," he went on, "is the lack of evidence. Nobody witnessed the alleged incident—for all intents and purposes, the building was empty. And if there is no evidence, Mr. Donato can neither be proved innocent nor guilty.

"But consider the effect of the accusation itself. Should the parents of this community be asked to entrust their children to a man who is guilty of the charge made against Mr. Donato? Absolutely not. On the other hand, if the accusation is false, what of Mr. Donato's reputation? The man is damned without proof.

"No, the whole situation is intolerable. And for that reason I began to look for something that would confirm Mr. Donato's guilt or innocence. I believe I've found it."

Mr. Strang reached into a drawer of the demonstration table and pulled out the sketch of the experiment Sheila had made earlier. "When I saw this drawing, which Sheila made," he went on, "I couldn't help noticing the striking resemblance to a picture in the chemistry textbook used in Mr. Donato's classes. Look."

He took a book titled *Elements of Chemistry* from the drawer and opened it to a previously marked page. The page showed a photograph of an experiment in progress. Holding Sheila's drawing next to the photograph, he continued.

"Notice the position of the bottles in the drawing and in the photograph," he said. "Look at the shadow cast by the ring stand. It goes off at the same angle as the one in Sheila's sketch. There are other points of similarity I might draw to your attention, such as the fact that all the objects in the photograph are in the same relative places as they are in the drawing, but I think you can see my point. It is possible that Sheila drew not from life, but from this photo in the textbook."

"But why on earth would my daughter do a thing like that?" demanded Mrs. Palinger angrily.

"Simply in order to 'prove' that she had spent half an hour in this room, rather than the five minutes claimed by Mr. Donato."

Fred Landerhoff peered closely at the book and the drawing. "It's possible, Mr. Strang," he said, "but hardly conclusive. It could be just coincidence."

"True," said the teacher. "But let's go a step further. According to the description of the experiment in the book, one of the bottles in the photograph contains hydrochloric acid—notice the HCl label—and the other is filled with ferrous sulfide, chemical formula FeS."

"But my daughter told you all that

this morning," cried Mrs. Palinger, "so how do you know she didn't see that very experiment being done by Mr. Donato right here in this room?"

"As a matter of fact," replied Mr. Strang, "I'm proceeding on the assumption that she *did* see it here, rather than in the book. And in order to clear up any confusion as to what really happened yesterday, I'd like to re-enact the events just as Sheila described them—including this experiment."

"No!" cried Sheila. "I won't let that man—"

"I will play the part of Mr. Donato," said Mr. Strang gently. "You have nothing to fear from me, Sheila. Now according to the way the experiment is described in the book, we first dump in some—er—fess." He removed the stopper from the flask and poured in a black powder from a bottle labeled FeS.

"Now for the hydrochloric acid." Mr. Strang replaced the stopper and poured a generous amount of liquid from the acid bottle down through the funnel. "And finally the flask goes on the stand over the flame." He lit the Bunsen burner.

"Now what?" asked Landerhoff.

"I pull down the shades," said Mr. Strang. "You did say they were down, didn't you Sheila?"

"Yes, that's right." The flask on the front table bubbled gently. Mr. Guthrey wrinkled his nose and peered furtively at Landerhoff.

"Now, Sheila," smiled Mr. Strang when the shades had been pulled down, "pretend that I'm Mr. Donato. What happens next?" The teacher noticed that Donato was chuckling to himself, while Mrs. Palinger had taken a perfumed handkerchief from her purse and placed it over her nose.

"Why—" Sheila began to shift restlessly in her seat. Her eyes were on the bubbling flask in the front of the room. "Why, Mr. Donato came over to the desk—"

"Like this?" Mr. Strang walked slowly up beside Sheila. Those in the rear of the room started coughing loudly. Fred Landerhoff fanned the air in front of his face with a small notebook.

"Yes, sir," replied Sheila. "Then he touched my hair with his hand."

The chemicals in the flask were bubbling more violently now.

"And then?"

"He put his face down into my hair. He said it smelled like—like—"

"Rotten eggs!" cried a voice.

"What?" said Mr. Strang gently. "I'm afraid you're out of order, Mr. Landerhoff."

"Maybe so, but that kid's out of her mind if she wants me to believe that somebody made love to her in a room where there was a stink like this! It smells like all the rotten eggs in the world! Mr. Strang, I'm willing to agree that Donato's not guilty of anything. Just let me out of this room before I suffocate. What is that stuff, anyway?"

Without waiting for an answer he

dashed to the door, flinging the movable desks aside in his hurry to escape the overpowering stench. He was followed in rapid succession by the Palingers, Guthrey, and Donato.

Mr. Strang remained behind only long enough to pour the bubbling mixture from the flask into the small sink and throw open all the windows of the room; then he too dashed into the hallway and took several deep breaths of comparatively fresh air.

Later, in Guthrey's office, Landerhoff repeated his question. "I've asked Sheila and her mother to wait outside," he said. "Now what was that stuff, Mr. Strang?"

"Hydrogen sulfide," said the teacher. "It's a gas formed when hydrochloric acid is combined with ferrous sulfide and heated. As you noticed up in the classroom, it's the same gas that gives rotten eggs their characteristic odor. I admit to using a bit more of the chemicals than is ordinarily used, but I think my point was made. One good whiff of that gas is enough to dispel all thoughts of *l'amour*."

"When did you first catch on that Sheila was lying?" asked Landerhoff.

"Just as soon as I realized that the experiment she was describing was the manufacture of hydrogen sulfide. She said that Russ began the experiment shortly after she entered the room. But I knew she couldn't have lasted in there for thirty minutes with a smell like that.

"Of course, when I saw that picture she drew, I knew she'd gotten it from the textbook—I've taught enough chemistry to know that book by heart. She'd have been better off if she hadn't been such a good artist. Fortunately for Mr. Donato, she didn't know the devastating effect that hydrogen sulfide has on the olfactory nerves."

"But why didn't Donato recognize the experiment?"

"She never mentioned it to him. It was only after Mr. Guthrey had sent Donato out of the office that Sheila realized time might be an issue. It wouldn't have been hard for her to find the chemistry text in the Lost and Found Box while she and her mother were waiting in the outer office. It was just too bad for her that she happened to turn to that particular experiment."

"But why would Sheila do a thing like this?" asked Donato.

"Maybe it was a way of getting into the limelight among her friends. Or it could be as simple as her coming home late and blaming you so she wouldn't be punished. Also, you're a fairly handsome young man, Russ. Perhaps it was a case of puppy love, and she carried her daydreaming too far. Perhaps Sheila herself doesn't know the real reason."

"What happens now, Fred?" Guthrey asked Landerhoff.

"Well, Mr. Donato will be reinstated with our apologies, of course," replied Landerhoff, "and I

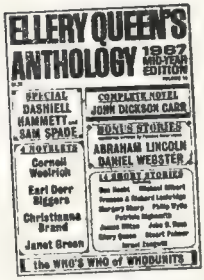
think I can convince Mrs. Palinger that Sheila should have a psychiatric examination. But what I'm wondering is what will happen if a similar situation comes up in the future."

"That's up to you, Mr. Landerhoff," said Mr. Strang. "You have a duty as a member of the Board of Education not only to the children of the district but to the men and women who teach them. Given an accusation without proof, who will you believe—the child or the teacher?"

Landerhoff looked from Mr. Strang to Donato and back again. He couldn't give an answer to Mr. Strang's question. He just didn't know.

Mr. Strang smiled. The look of doubt in Landerhoff's eyes was enough for him. Just a reasonable doubt.

That was enough.



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THE THEFT FROM THE ONYX POOL

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"You steal tihngs, don't you?" Nick Velvet regarded her with a slight smile. "Only the hearts of beautiful maidens."

"No, seriously. I can pay."

"Seriously. What do you want stolen?"

"The water from a swimming pool."

He continued smiling at her, but a portion of his mind wished he were back on the front porch with Gloria and a cold beer. The habits of the very rich had never been for him. "I could always pull the plug," he suggested, still smiling.

The girl, whose name was Asher Dumont, ground out her cigarette with a gesture of angry irritation. "Look, Mr. Velvet, I didn't arrange to have you invited here so we could trade small talk. I happen to know that you steal unusual things, unique things, and that your fee is $20,000. Correct?"

"All right," he told her, playing along. "I don't know exactly how you came upon that information in your circle, but I'll admit it's reasonably accurate, Miss Dumont."

"Then will you?"

"Will I what?"

"Steal the water from Samuel Fitzpatrick's pool?"

Nick Velvet had been approached by many people during his career, and as his peculiar reputation had grown, he'd been hired to steal many curious things. He'd once stolen a tiger from a zoo, and a stained-glass window from a museum. His fee for such odd thefts was a flat $20,000, with an extra $10,000 for especially hazarous tasks. He never stole money, or the obvious valuables that other thieves went after. He dealt only in the unusual, often in the bizarre—but in his field he was the best in the business.

"That's a peculiar assignment even for me," he told the girl. She was blonde, with shoulder-length straight hair in the tradition of girl folksingers. He wouldn't have been surprised to see her back in his old

Greenwich Village neighborhood, but somehow she seemed out of place sipping cocktails at a society reception in Westchester. It was only her dress, a gleaming satin sheath, that belonged at the party—not the girl.

"I understood that you specialize in the peculiar."

"I do. When do you want it done, and where is the place?"

She sipped her cocktail and glanced around to make certain they weren't overheard. "Samuel Fitzpatrick has an estate twenty miles from here, in Connecticut. I'll find an excuse to take you over there. After that you're on your own. Only one stipulation—it must be done before next week-end's holiday. Before the Fourth of July."

"I suggested pulling the plug. That would be the easiest way. It would save you twenty thousand."

"You don't seem to understand, Mr. Velvet—I *want* the water from that pool. I want you to steal the water, all of it, and deliver it to me."

"Is this some sort of wild bet?" he asked. He could imagine nothing else.

Asher Dumont stretched her long tanned legs under the table and drew in on her cigarette. "I understood that you were a businessman, Mr. Velvet. The reason shouldn't be important to you."

"It's not. I was only being inquisitive."

"Can you come with me to the Fitzpatrick estate in the morning?"

"By the way, who is this Samuel Fitzpatrick? The name is vaguely familiar."

"He's a writer and producer of mysteries. Two hits on Broadway and he's had a very successful series on television. Remember *The Dear Slayer?*"

"I don't follow the theater as closely as I should," Nick admitted, "but I've heard of Fitzpatrick. That's all I need to know about him. It gives me a talking point."

"Then I'll see you in the morning, Mr. Velvet?"

"Since it's business, Miss Dumont, I usually receive a $5000 retainer in advance, and the balance when I complete the assignment."

She didn't blink. "Very well, I'll have it for you."

Nick left her at the table and threaded his way through the reception crowd. In the outer hall he found a phone booth and dialed Gloria's number.

"Hi, how're things?"

"Great, Nicky. You coming home?"

"I'll be a while. Maybe a week. We're checking out some new plant sites in Connecticut."

"Oh, Nicky! You'll be away over the Fourth!"

"Maybe not. I'll try to be home by then. Maybe we can have a picnic or something."

He knew that would satisfy her, and after a few more words he hung up. Often on summer nights, sitting on the porch with Gloria, he'd be

tempted to give it all up and take a job as a salesman or a bookkeeper. But always there was the odd invitation from somebody like Asher Dumont to get him back to work. The money was good, and he liked his "specialty." He was a thief, and he knew he'd never change.

Asher Dumont picked him up in a little white sports car that seemed hardly big enough for her lanky frame and long legs. The top was down, and her long blonde hair spun out behind her like a banner as she wheeled the car onto the parkway and headed for Connecticut.

"You didn't tell me to dress casually," he said, commenting on her shorts and blouse.

"Sam would be suspicious right away if he ever saw me in a dress." She steered the car around a truck and shot the speed up to seventy. "There's a check for $5,000 in my purse. Take it out."

"A check?"

"Go on, I'm not trying to get evidence against you. I don't carry that much around in cash."

"I'll have to cash this before I finish the job."

"Sure. Right now, though, tell me what kind of cover story you'll use with Fitzpatrick. I'm introducing you as someone interested in his plays."

"Better fill me in on the sort of thing he likes to produce."

As she talked he had the distinct impression she was merely a rich girl indulging in a game. His business associates were more often shady gang figures or nervous diplomats, the people who could afford to hire Nick Velvet. He didn't know if he liked it, but she was nice to look at and besides, he'd never been commissioned to steal the water from a swimming pool.

Samuel Fitzpatrick's estate was actually a generous-sized house with a double garage, situated at the edge of a gently rolling field of scrub brush and young trees. Nick looked out across the low stone walls and open fields and wondered if people still went fox hunting in country like this.

Asher didn't bother with the doorbell, but took Nick around the back to a flagstone patio which led to a fenced-in swimming pool. A middle-aged man with thinning hair and a tanned, weathered face opened the gate to meet them. "Well, Asher! You're more lovely every day."

"Thanks, Sam," she said, bestowing a quick kiss on his cheek. "This is the man I told you about on the phone—Nick Velvet."

"Velvet?" Fitzpatrick extended his freckled hand. "Glad to meet you."

He led them through the wooden gate to the pool. It was a medium-sized one as such things went, with a shallow end for wading and a deep end with a springy diving board. There was a woman in the pool, swimming with a powerful

breast stroke, but Nick couldn't see her face at the moment. She seemed to have taken no notice of their arrival.

"Nice place you have here," Nick observed.

"I like privacy. Nearest neighbor's more than a mile down the road."

"This is quite a pool." Nick had been drawn to the edge, noticing the way the smooth edge glistened in layers of multiple colors. It was like marble or quartz, but cut through to show the layers of black and white, with sometimes just a hint of red or brown. "What's this edge made of?"

"Onyx. My first big play on Broadway was *The Onyx Ring*. The pool is one of my few luxuries."

Nick was beginning to understand. With the water out of the pool something might be done to remove these onyx layers from the edge. He wondered if Asher Dumont had a poor boy friend lurking somewhere offstage.

The woman climbed out of the water, feeling for an oversized bath towel. Her figure was still good, but Nick knew she'd never see forty again. Asher made the introductions. "Nick, this is Sam's wife, Lydia. This is a friend, Nick Velvet, Lydia."

The woman squinted and groped on the poolside table for her glasses. "I'm blind without them," she explained. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Velvet. Lovely weather, isn't it?"

"Certainly is," Nick agreed, sinking into the red-and-green chair that Fitzpatrick had indicated. He was studying the rear of the house, and the street beyond where no traffic seemed to pass. An idea was beginning to shape itself in his mind.

"Let me get drinks for us," Lydia Fitzgerald offered, blinking from behind her thick glasses.

"Fine idea," her husband said. Then, "Now, what did you want to see me about, Mr. Velvet?"

"I admired your plays," Nick said, playing with the plastic webbing of his chair. "Especially *The Dear Slayer*. Quite a tricky ending."

Fitzpatrick leaned back in his own chair and stroked his thinning hair. "That's what you need for Broadway, a trick ending."

"I have a plot that might interest you," Nick told him. "It's never been done before."

"You're a writer?"

"No, that's why Asher suggested I come to you."

The producer smiled slightly, as if he'd heard it all before. Lydia returned with drinks and settled to the ground at her husband's side. "I get a lot of people with ideas," Fitzgerald said. "Usually I don't even like to listen to them. But I'll make an exception since you're a friend of Asher's. This girl is like a daughter to me." He reached out to take her hand and she smiled as if on cue.

Nick sipped his drink. "Well, it's a locked-room sort of thing."

"Locked rooms are a bit old-fashioned for Broadway."

"Not this one!" Nick hoped he was conveying the proper enthusiasm. "Listen. A man is murdered in a completely locked room. The doors and windows are all sealed and there's no secret passage."

"A locked room is difficult to bring off on the stage, when one whole wall is always open to the audience. But go on—how's it done?"

Nick leaned back and grinned. "There's a type of laser beam that can pass through a transparent surface without damaging it. The killer fires the beam through the closed and sealed window, murders the man inside, and yet the room remains completely locked."

Fitzpatrick nodded in admiration. "Not bad. Not bad at all, but I think it would go better in print than on the stage. If I were still doing the television series I might give it a try—I've always liked wild things like that, the wilder the better."

Nick stood up and strolled slowly along the edge of the pool as he talked, and once he managed to slip in a question on the pool's depth, direct to Mrs. Fitzpatrick. The slanting bottom made it difficult to figure exactly, but he thought the pool probably held close to 19,000 gallons of water. A big job for any thief. He knew it would take days to empty it by ordinary means.

It was nearly four when they finally left the Fitzpatricks, with Nick shaking hands and promising to keep Sam informed of his progress with the idea. Then he was back in the sports car with Asher, racing through the quiet countryside.

"What do you think?" she asked.

He glanced down at her bare knees and thought of a reply, but then decided to stick to business. "It can be done," he told her.

"By the week-end?"

"By the week-end. I just have to check on one piece of equipment and find a few people to help me. Do you need *all* the water?"

She thought about that. "Not every drop, naturally, but most of it. Enough to empty the pool."

"I'm interested in why you want it, why it's so valuable to you."

"You're getting $20,000," she reminded him. "For that much you can stay curious."

"I have a couple of ideas," he went on. "Once the pool is empty, perhaps those onyx slabs could be pried up and stolen."

She glanced at him sideways. "You really think I'm a criminal, don't you? Those slabs aren't even real onyx—just a good imitation."

"You can't want the water for itself. It must be the emptiness of the pool that you really want."

"I hired you to be a thief, not a detective."

"Sometimes the logic demanded by the two professions isn't that different," he told her. "What's your connection with Fitzpatrick and his wife, anyway?"

"You mean the bit about my being like a daughter to him? I suppose it's true in a way. His first wife was Mary Dumont, my aunt. I spent most of my childhood with them, and they really did treat me like a daughter. My parents both died early, but there was a great deal of money in both branches of the family. I think, really, that Sam resented my aunt's money. Anyway, a month or so after his first play was a hit, he asserted his independence one night and Aunt Mary left him. That was ten years ago, and nobody's seen her since—though she occasionally sends me money through a lawyer in California."

"Fitzpatrick divorced her?"

The girl nodded. "On the grounds of desertion. He married Lydia three years ago."

"You resent Lydia, don't you?"

"Because she took my aunt's place? Oh, I suppose so."

Nick Velvet was thinking of Lydia Fitzpatrick's poor eyesight, and her swimming habits. Would she come running out to dive into the pool one morning and find only the hard concrete bottom waiting for her? Or did such things only happen in comic strips?

"One thing," he said. "Of course, Fitzpatrick's going to know the water's being taken. There's no way of stealing 19,000 gallons of water without his knowing about it."

"I want him to know," she told Nick. "As long as it's before the holiday week-end." She steered the sports car like an expert, maneuvering it through the beginnings of the rush-hour traffic. "I still can't imagine how you're going to do it, though. If he knows you're taking it, how are you going to have the time to empty the entire pool?"

"Leave that to me," Nick said with a smile. "That's what you're paying me for."

Friday afternoon was calm and clear, with a musty heaviness about the air that hinted at a change in weather before the long week-end really got under way. Sam Fitzpatrick and his wife were at the pool —she was sunning herself while he was typing a reply to a letter in the morning's mail.

It was mid-afternoon when he first smelled the smoke, and glanced over the fence at the nearby field. "Lydia! There's a grass fire here! Come look!"

"Hadn't we better call the Fire Department, Sam?" The fire already had a good start, spreading in a sort of ring that reached from the distant woods almost to Fitzpatrick's line.

"Damn! I suppose I'd better." But then they heard the rising wail of the schoolhouse siren, and the answering call from the firehouse. The volunteers had been summoned and were on their way.

Within ten minutes the flaming field had been converged on by two pumpers and a pair of auxiliary water trucks. There were no hydrants out this far, and the volun-

teers had to bring their own water supply. Fitzpatrick knew most of the volunteer firemen by name, but this day a stranger in rubber coat and leather helmet came running up to the fence.

"Mr. Fitzpatrick?"

"Yes. That's quite a blaze you've got there."

"Sure is." The stranger turned up his collar and glanced over Fitzpatrick's shoulder. "We need more water than our trucks can supply. Could we throw a hose into your swimming pool and pump out the water?"

"What? Say, don't I know you from somewhere?"

"Better hurry," the fireman warned him. "A shift in the wind could endanger your house."

"Well . . . all right, I suppose so."

In a moment the heavy canvas hose was over the fence, splashing into the deep end of the pool. The fireman gave a signal to the nearest pumper and they started to drain Sam Fitzpatrick's water. Off in the distance two firemen played a smaller hose on the leading edge of the fire.

The familiar-looking fireman was everywhere, directing activities, shouting orders. After a half hour, when the pool was already half empty, one of the auxiliary water trucks pulled out through the high grass to get a refill at the town tank.

Finally, when another truck-load of water and the remainder of the pool's supply had been used up, the fire began to retreat and die. Sam Fitzpatrick watched it with relief, and he called out to the familiar-looking fireman, "You fellows want a drink?"

"No time now, sir. Thanks anyway."

"What about my pool?"

"The trucks will be out tomorrow to refill it. Thanks for your help."

Fitzpatrick watched them pull away and then walked over to stare into the empty swimming pool. At the deepest end a few inches of water remained, but otherwise there was only the damp concrete below.

He started to light a cigarette, then stopped suddenly with the lighted match in mid-air. He'd just remembered where he had seen the fireman before.

Asher Dumont was waiting in her sports car a few miles down the road. Nick hopped off one of the pumpers and tossed his helmet and rubber coat onto the seat. Then he ran over to the car. "Where do you want it? 19,000 gallons of Sam Fitzpatrick's swimming-pool water, as ordered."

"You're mad," she said with a laugh. "I never thought you'd be able to do it."

"I've had harder assignments than this."

"But I still don't understand. The firemen—"

"While we were pumping out his pool with a big hose and filling up

one of the auxiliary water trucks, we were fighting the fire with a small hose from the other truck. With the high grass he couldn't see which hoses went where. And when the first truck was full, we took it out and brought in another empty one. Each of the pumpers has a 1,000-gallon tank of its own, so we had plenty of water for the fire without using the water from the pool."

"But these are the real firemen and their trucks!"

Nick nodded. "I gave them $100 each and told them we wanted to shoot a film for television. They know Fitzpatrick's in the business, so they believed it."

"Where were your cameras, Mr. Television Producer?" she asked with an impish grin.

"I told them this was the dress rehearsal. People will believe a lot for $100." He opened the door and slid in beside her. "How about my money now?"

"Just one more thing," she said, suddenly serious.

"What's that?"

"I want you to come back to Sam's house with me and tell him exactly what you did."

"Now we're getting to the root of it, aren't we?"

"Maybe." She gunned the motor into life.

"We're going there now?"

"Tomorrow, when the week-end's started. Then you'll get your money. It's worth every cent of it."

"What about the water?"

"There's a dry creek behind my place. We can dam it up and keep it there."

He shook his head. "You're a wonderful girl."

"Wait till tomorrow, buddy."

He could wait. There was a question forming itself in his mind, and he would have to ask her when the time came. But for now he could wait.

The following morning Lydia Fitzpatrick led them out to the pool. Asher wore a pale summer dress with a full skirt, and seemed somehow overdressed to Nick after her brief costumes of the past days. There was something else different about her, too—the spark was gone from her eyes, replaced by something cold and hard.

"Asher! How are you?" Sam Fitzpatrick asked, rising from his deck chair to meet them.

"I'm fine, Sam." Quietly, tight-lipped.

"And you've brought Mr. Velvet again!" The words rang not quite true to Nick's ears.

A garden hose was hanging over the side of the swimming pool, feeding a trickle of water into the puddle at the bottom. "We can't get any pressure out of this thing," Lydia explained. "It'll take us a week to fill it again. The firemen needed the water yesterday—"

Fitzpatrick had resumed his seat, but Asher remained standing. "I know," she said. "Tell them, Nick."

"I don't think you have to tell me anything," Fitzpatrick said. "I finally recognized Mr. Velvet in his fireman's suit—but not in time to keep him from taking my water. And I suppose you set the fire yourself?"

Nick nodded. "I was paid $20,000 by this young lady to steal the water from your pool."

"Twenty . . . ! Asher, have you gone completely mad?"

"The money came from my family. I think they would have wanted it spent this way."

"But why?"

"I've taken samples from that water—a hundred samples already, with more to come. They're all being analyzed, Sam."

"Analyzed?"

"There's chlorine in your pool water. Apparently you're not familiar with the effects of chlorine on calcified cement. There'll be traces of calcium in that water, Sam, especially after ten years."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do, Sam. I'll be back on Tuesday with the results of the analyses."

Nick hesitated a moment, then followed her out, leaving Fitzpatrick and his wife staring after them.

Back in the car, heading away from the house, Nick Velvet leaned back in the seat. "I had a question to ask you last night. I'll ask it now. Was Fitzpatrick installing his pool the night your aunt disappeared?"

She drove for a long time without answering, bathing in a morning sun already high in the sky. "How did you know?" she asked finally.

"He built the pool in honor of his first hit play, and you told me your aunt vanished a month or so after it opened. It seems logical that the two events came at about the same time."

She nodded. "The divorce papers were never served on Aunt Mary. That's what first made me suspicious. Last winter I hired a private detective to check on this lawyer who's been sending me the money in my aunt's name. He reported that the money was actually coming from Sam. That's when I really became suspicious that something had happened to her ten years ago."

"And you remembered the pool."

"I remembered. I was only fourteen at the time, but I remembered that last day with my aunt. We'd watched them pouring the concrete for the bottom of the pool. Aunt Mary said it wouldn't be hard till morning." She was staring straight ahead at the road.

Nick Velvet lit a cigarette. "There's no such thing as a chlorine effect on calcified cement. You made that up, and you wasted your twenty thousand."

"I didn't waste the twenty thousand. It had to be a big lie if he was to believe it at all. He'd have laughed in my face if I took a single test-tube sample from the pool. But he's written this sort of thing, remember—wild, way-out stuff, real Campy.

I know him—this is just bizarre enough for him to believe. The calcium from her bones, being drawn out of the cement bottom . . ."

"What do you do now?"

"Wait."

They didn't have long to wait. She came to Nick's hotel room the following morning with his check.

"You're up early," he said. It was the Fourth of July, and outside someone was setting off illegal fireworks.

"Lydia phoned me. He killed himself during the night. Out by the pool."

Nick Velvet turned away. "I'd hate to be your enemy."

"It had to be done."

"Just one thing," he said. "Why did it have to be over the long weekend?"

"He was a writer, remember?" She was staring out the window at something far away. "I didn't want him calling the library or some science editor in New York to check on my chlorine-on-cement effect. This way he couldn't find out till Tuesday, and I knew he wouldn't last that long."

Nick thought about Gloria, back home on the porch, and remembered that he'd promised to be there for the Fourth. It was time to be going.

NEXT MONTH . . .

***NEW* short stories—including**

LAWRENCE TREAT's *B As in Burglary*

CELIA FREMLIN's *The Special Gift*

CORNELL WOOLRICH's *Divorce—New York Style*

the *newest* short story by

AVRAM DAVIDSON

Avram Davidson's newest story has a curious connotation for your Editors. We recall that when the Ellery Queen novel titled INSPECTOR QUEEN'S OWN CASE *(subtitled* NOVEMBER SONG*) first appeared in 1956 (is it that long ago?), only one reviewer throughout the country mentioned the major theme of the novel—gerontology. It was as if all the critics but one had failed even to become aware of the main theme . . . Well, we won't fail to mention the basic theme of Avram Davidson's newest story. It deals with a crime which comes into being because of one of the most important of contemporary problems—automation. We don't know if this is the first crime story spawned by automation —probably not; but surely it is an early example . . .*

THE MEMORY BANK

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

THOM HART'S ONLY DISSATISFACtion with having cooked Joe's goose lay in the latter's being really so far beneath him. A junior, even a very junior, executive shouldn't have to bother noticing an old clerk long overdue for retirement. A young man whose shirts are tailored for him in the right shop ought not to have to trouble himself with an old man whose rumpled and dirty suit hasn't been dry-cleaned from one year to another; someone favored with so good an appearance —Thom checked that line of thought with a mental shrug. Joe with his dirty eyeglasses—Goodbye, Joe.

The Board of Directors Room, now. Thom looked around it approvingly. Its decor was dull and dingy with age, but that didn't matter much at the moment. That could all be changed. Maybe the Directors and the senior executives—men like Roger Stanton, C. Langley Hopkins, Sidney Edwards, John H. B. Powell, and the others—didn't realize that one day Thom Hart was going to sit at the head of that table. In fact, come to think of it, few of them were likely to be alive by that time. Some of them didn't seem to be very alive even now. But Thom Hart was!

Promotion and advancement

(not always synonymous) were reasonably sure in the normal course of events—although you never *knew*. But Thom Hart wasn't going to wait for the normal course of events. He caught sight of his reflection in the glass case of one of the ship models (ship models!) and allowed himself a brief smile. It was fortunate that he was neither *too* handsome nor *too* sentimental. Then he attended to what Mr. Sidney Edwards was saying.

"It's too bad, though, I suppose. Joe is an institution."

And Roger Stanton, nodding, said the same thing.

It was true enough. If anyone, for example, wanted to know how many rounds Corbett and Jackson went in 1892, or the batting figures on Ty Cobb for 1914, or exactly when Braddock was heavyweight champion, Joe knew. For more academic tastes or interests, Joe also knew when Colley Cibber was Poet Laureate, whom Millard Filemore appointed to head his State Department, the ships involved in the Battle of Jutland on both sides, the details of every preferential tariff that ever was, and the unlisted phone numbers of all the company's best customers. It was always a good game to call in Joe to impress a visiting fireman by asking Joe for an arcane and unlikely bit of data.

Joe always knew.

He wasn't employed for that, though, but it gave some idea of what he was employed for—his phenomenal memory for every single detail of the company's business. Joe knew where every item of stock, however small or scant, was located, had been located, or was not located. He knew exactly how everything could be done, could not be done, had once been done, and could (or could not) be done again, if necessary. Joe knew why X weight carbon paper had been discontinued as a stocked item since 1928. That Scotch (and which brand) was the thing to send Mr. Armstrong, whereas Irish (but which brand not) was the only thing for Mr. Bainbridge. And so on.

In short, although all this and much more were on file here and there and somewhere else, it was—it seemed—always easier to just ask Joe.

Who, speaking of the devil, had finally got around to coming in. It would have been just like him not to show up on time. Not that it would have been hard to find him, for he never went far; in fact, for years he had even lived here, in a tiny apartment originally meant for a watchman.

". . . served us faithfully and well," John H. B. Powell was saying. "I am not even sure that this machine, computer, memory bank or whatever they call it, can do your job. In which case, we'll—" he chuckled—"have to be calling you back out of retirement."

Joe said, "No."

It wasn't quite clear that he realized exactly what was going on. It wasn't quite certain, for that matter, that automation was called for as a matter of present necessity to the company. But that—although the older men here didn't realize it—wasn't the point. Any more than it was the point that May Jenson was a good stenographer. The point *there* had been that there were lots of good stenographers and that Thom Hart didn't need to keep on anyone he didn't care to. May had eventually got that point and climbed into Thom's black Jaguar in her new red dress and not much later had taken the same dress off without getting out of the car.

But the point *here* was that Joe wasn't going to live forever and was bound, eventually, to be replaced by magnetic tape. What circumstances might obtain then couldn't be predicted. They might be circumstances which would be of no particular use to Thom—which was why he had to act in the matter now. *Now.*

By proposing the new equipment Thom had connected himself with it in everybody's mind. He had also made it his business to become informed all about it. May, having become more or less reconciled to things, had then become annoyed when he had spent so many evenings studying equipment instead of studying her. Thom made a mental note: she'd have to go too, one of these days.

Meanwhile and afterward, as automation moved on up in the company's needs, Thom Hart would naturally move on up with it.

"Think of all the ball games you'll be able to see from now on," Sidney Edwards said jovially.

"I never watch them," Joe said. "I just remember the figures."

The perhaps very slightly embarrassed pause in the ceremony was finally broken by the first V.P., a reformed Lothario turned moralist. "I'm sure," said Roger Stanton, "that you won't in any event find life in retirement dull. If anyone can, you can say, *'My mind to me a kingdom is.'*"

Joe looked at him through his bleared spectacles. Now he'd have to be moving out of his fusty, familiar little cell in the warehouse. And eat elsewhere than in the company employees' cafeteria. And live where? And do what?

"'Such present joys therein I find,/That it excels all other bliss/That earth affords or grows by kind:/Though much I want which most would/Have/Yet my mind forbids to crave.'—Edward Dyer, 1540; 1607. Rawlinson Poetry MS 85. You mean," Joe added as the admiring chuckle died down, "that I can remember good. So I can think about all the things I remember and I won't get bored."

"Exactly," said Stanton. "So—"

Joe nodded. "Maybe, though, I spent too much time on that. Maybe I should of had more, like, a good

time. Girls and things. And cars." He fell silent.

With a look around at his colleagues and in a let's-get-on-with-it tone of voice, Stanton said, "Thom, it seems appropriate that you should make the presentation." He handed him a flat thin box.

Thom hadn't expected it, but he rose to the occasion. "We have something else for you to remember, Joe. Our—the *company's* gratitude. It's one of the best watches money can buy, and—"

Joe's comment did not seem a deliberate interruption; his comment might have arisen from some private thought, the way he said it. "I don't really need no watch."

Then Joe nodded and seemed to focus his eyes on the young man now looking at him with a trace of annoyance. "You don't spend *your* time that way, Mr. Hart," he said. "You got this '66 black Jaguar and a key to the executive parking lot. June 16—that fell on a Wednesday, average temperature 85—you were there from about 10:45 to, say, 1:30 with a girl in a red dress name of —"

Thom hadn't known his face could get so hot. It was old Mr. Hopkins who broke in with a cough and a brisk, "We want you to have this watch, Joe, because—"

The dull eyes moved over to him. "There weren't any Jaguars in those days," Joe said. "You had a red Bearcat, Mr. Hopkins, license number W 1809. Week-end of Labor Day, 1928, you spent all Saturday night in your father's old office here with a lady in a white dress, name of Mrs. —"

"That's enough, Joe! Do you hear?" Old C. Langley Hopkins seemed about to get up, but he sat down again.

Mr. Sidney Edwards said, "More than enough." His deadly look was directed, not at Joe, but at C. Langley Hopkins, and Thom—for a fleeting and uneasy second—felt convinced that Edwards had more than a good idea who the lady in the white dress must have been.

Then Mr. John H. B. Powell said, "Not another word of that, I warn you, Joe."

Joe, unruffled, looked at him and said, "Mr. Powell."

Gray-haired Mr. Powell said, "You'd btter be quiet, Joe. I was a married man when I first came here and I still am and I'm not ashamed to say that I've never even looked at another—"

He began to talk about how Mr. Powell had been the first to introduce training films to the company. The men present subsided somewhat—though only somewhat. There was a great deal of throat clearing and shifting around in seats.

"On October 11, 1933," Joe went on in his monotonous voice, "After the company didn't declare a dividend for the third year in a row and the Brunswick National Bank said they couldn't extend our note again,

sometime between eleven p.m. and midnight the old north warehouse, that didn't have hardly anything in it, burned down. Luckily, by Mr. Powell's orders and against everyone else's wishes, the payment on Phoenix policy number 27876 had been paid just two days before; it only took care of the old north warehouse and Phoenix had to pay off. But it covered the Brunswick National note."

John H. B. Powell seemed to have shrunk a bit back into his gray suit. His face seemed to have gone gray to match it. Joe went on to talk about certain fragments of celluloid film found in the ruined warehouse.

"Phoenix couldn't prove they didn't belong there," Joe said. "But they didn't. Film was stored only in the main warehouse—third, fourth, and fifth shelves of the third bin on the right-hand side of aisle G, west end. Morning of October 12, training films RD 113 to 127 inclusive were missing. We didn't restock them till next April 23, though, because Mr. Powell never ordered any of *those* films showed till then and so it wasn't until then that anyone noticed they were missing. Anyone *else,*" Joe added reflectively.

There was a long, long silence, broken only by loud breathing. Then C. Langley Hopkins said, in a flat, controlled voice, "Suppose you retired on full salary, Joe. Eh? Instead of just your pension. Would you want to do that? And take a trip around the world at our—at company expense?"

Joe said, "No."

"What *do* you want, then?"

Joe looked around the room—at the photographs and portraits of deceased members, at the ship models, at the Seth Thomas clock; he looked out of the window at the factory and warehouse and yards. "Nothing," he said. "Just want to keep on here like always. That's the only thing I want."

The silence this time was briefer, and marked by an exchange of quick glances among the Directors. Sidney Edwards said, "Well, I'm sure it can be arranged—it's a very moderate desire. After all, automation isn't everything. Humanity counts for something. We—the company is not ungrateful, Joe. Stay on—yes, by all means stay on. And as long as you like. But, er, do take the watch. Please. After all, we've already had it engraved, so we can't get our money back." He watched the man remove the thin flat box from Thom Hart's suddenly fumbling fingers. "Thank you, Joe."

Then, as Joe started to shamble away with gift in hand, Mr. Powell checked him. "One more item. You've told us a number of interesting things about some of us, Joe." He chuckled thinly. "But only about *some* of us. This, ah, sort of leaves some of us at a—shall we say?—disadvantage. Wouldn't the rest of us agree? I rather thought

you would. So—Joe—before you go—let's hear some interesting memorabilia about the others. You might begin with Mr. Stanton, for example."

Roger Stanton roared and pushed himself halfway up from the table, but he was immediately voted down by a voice vote. Joe shambled back.

"On January 11, 1936, when Mr. Stanton told his wife that he was going to Bermuda—"

It was Mr. Hopkins who interrupted this time. "I really do not believe that we need detain Mr. Hart," he said. "It is true that Mr. Hart knows a great deal about computers and memory banks. Indeed, it was at his original suggestion that we decided—mistakenly, as it now appears—to replace Joe with one. Nevertheless, I am sure that Mr. Hart can find something else—besides memories—to occupy his time—while he is still with us, that is."

Hart rose and excused himself. For a moment more he observed them still looking at him, before their eyes swung back to Joe. And not lovingly, either. They were certainly not a happy bunch right now. Still, they might not fire Thom Hart after all. They just might keep him on, as they were keeping Joe on. But most assuredly they would never advance or promote him.

It certainly looked as if Thom Hart had cooked the wrong goose.

NEXT MONTH . . .

2 *HONOR ROLL* reprints—

AGATHA CHRISTIE's *At the Stroke of Twelve*

JOHN DICKSON CARR's *The Lion's Paw*

a **MISS MARPLE** *story by*

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Miss Marple's outstanding quality as a detective stems from a simple but fundamental belief: "Human nature is much the same everywhere." Miss Marple did not have to travel far from her native village of St. Mary Mead to learn about life and to understand the hearts and minds of people; and then, of course, there was Miss Marple's added advantage—her splendid opportunities to observe life and people in so "intimate" a community as an English village . . . Miss Jane Marple—long may she flourish!

ASK AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"And now, Aunt Jane, it is up to you," said Raymond West.

"Yes, Aunt Jane, we are expecting something really spicy," chimed in Joyce Lemprière.

"Now, you are laughing at me, my dears," said Miss Marple placidly. "You think that because I have lived in this out-of-the-way spot all my life I am not likely to have had any very interesting experiences."

"God forbid that I should ever regard village life as peaceful and uneventful," said Raymond with fervor. "Not after the horrible revelations we have heard from you! The cosmopolitan world seems a mild and peaceful place compared with St. Mary Mead."

"Well, my dear," said Miss Marple, "human nature is much the same everywhere, and, of course, one has opportunities of observing it at closer quarters in a village."

"You really are unique, Aunt Jane," cried Joyce. "I hope you don't mind me calling you Aunt Jane?" she added. "I don't know why I do it."

"Don't you, my dear?" said Miss Marple.

She looked up for a moment or two with something quizzical in her glance, which made the blood flame to the girl's cheeks. Raymond West fidgeted and cleared his throat in a somewhat embarrassed manner.

Miss Marple looked at them both and smiled again, and bent her attention once more to her knitting.

Copyright 1928 by Agatha Christie; renewed; originally titled "The Thumb Mark of St. Peter"

"It is true, of course, that I have lived what is called a very uneventful life, but I have had a lot of experiences in solving different little problems that have arisen. Some of them have been really quite ingenious, but it would be no good telling them to you, because they are about such unimportant things that you would not be interested—just things as: Who cut the meshes of Mrs. Jones's string bag? And why did Mrs. Sims wear her new fur coat only once?

"Very interesting things, really, to any student of human nature. No, the only experience that I can remember that would be of interest to you is the one about my poor niece Mabel's husband.

"It is about ten or fifteen years ago now, and happily it is all over and done with, and everyone has forgotten about it. People's memories are short—a lucky thing, I think."

Miss Marple paused and murmured to herself, "I must just count this row. The decreasing is a little awkward. One, two, three, four, five, and then three purl; that is right. Now, what was I saying? Oh, yes, about poor Mabel.

"Mabel was my niece. A nice girl, really a very nice girl, but just a trifle what one might call *silly*. Rather fond of being melodramatic and of saying a great deal more than she meant whenever she was upset. She married a Mr. Denman when she was twenty-two, and I am afraid it was not a very happy marriage.

"I had hoped very much that the attachment would not come to anything, for Mr. Denman was a man of very violent temper—not the kind of man who would be patient with Mabel's foibles—and I also learned that there was insanity in his family. However, girls were just as obstinate then as they are now, and as they always will be. And so Mabel married him.

"I didn't see very much of her after her marriage. She came to stay with me once or twice, and they asked me there several times, but as a matter of fact, I am not very fond of staying in other people's houses, and I always managed to make some excuse. They had been married ten years when Mr. Denman died suddenly. There were no children, and he left all his money to Mabel.

"I wrote, of course, and offered to come to Mabel if she wanted me; but she wrote back a very sensible letter, and I gathered that she was not altogether overwhelmed by grief. I thought that was only natural, because I knew they had not been getting on together for some time.

"It was not until about three months afterwards that I got a most hysterical letter from Mabel, begging me to come to her, and saying that things were going from bad to worse, and she couldn't stand it much longer.

"So, of course," Miss Marple went on, "I put Clara on board wages and sent the plate and the King Charles

tankard to the bank, and I went off at once. I found Mabel in a very nervous state. The house, Myrtle Dene, was a fairly large one, very comfortably furnished. There was a cook and a house-parlormaid as well as a nurse-attendant to look after old Mr. Denman, Mabel's husband's father, who was what is called 'not quite right in the head.' Quite peaceful and well-behaved, but distinctly odd at times. As I say, there was insanity in the family.

"I was really shocked to see the change in Mabel. She was a mass of nerves, twitching all over, yet I had the greatest difficulty in making her tell me what the trouble was. I got it, as one always does get at these things, indirectly. I asked her about some friends of hers she was always mentioning in her letters, the Gallaghers.

"She said, to my surprise, that she hardly ever saw them nowadays. Other friends whom I mentioned elicited the same remark. I spoke to her then of the folly of shutting herself up and brooding, and especially of the silliness of cutting herself adrift from her friends. Then she came bursting out with the truth.

" 'It is not my doing, it is theirs. There is not a soul in the place who will speak to me now. When I go down the High Street they all get out of the way so that they shan't have to meet me or speak to me. I am like a kind of leper. It is awful, and I can't bear it any longer. I shall have to sell the house and go abroad. Yet why should I be driven away from home like this? I have done nothing.'

"I was more disturbed than I can tell you. I was knitting a comforter for old Mrs. Hay at the time, and in my perturbation I dropped two stitches and never discovered it until long after.

" 'My dear Mabel,' I said, 'you amaze me. But what is the cause of all this?'

"Even as a child Mabel was always difficult. I had the greatest difficulty in getting her to give me a straightforward answer to my question. She would only say vague things about talk and idle people who had nothing better to do than gossip, and people who put ideas into other people's heads.

" 'That is all quite clear to me,' I said. 'There is evidently some story being circulated about you. But what that story is you must know as well as anyone. And you are going to tell me.'

" 'It is so wicked,' moaned Mabel.

" 'Of course it is wicked,' I said briskly. 'There is nothing that you can tell me about people's minds that would astonish or surprise me. Now, Mabel, will you tell me in plain English what people are saying about you?'

"Then it all came out.

"It seemed that Goffrey Denman's death, being quite sudden and unexpected, gave rise to various rumors. In fact—and in plain English as I had put it to her—people were say-

ing that she had poisoned her husband.

"Now, as I expect you know, there is nothing more cruel than talk, and there is nothing more difficult to combat. When people say things behind your back there is nothing you can refute or deny, and the rumors go on growing and growing, and no one can stop them.

"I was quite certain of one thing: Mabel was quite incapable of poisoning anyone. And I didn't see why life should be ruined for her and her house made unbearable just because in all probability she had been doing something silly and foolish.

" 'There is no smoke without fire,' I said. 'Now, Mabel, you have got to tell me what started people off on this tack. There must have been *something.*'

"Mabel was very incoherent, and declared there was nothing—nothing at all, except, of course, that Geoffrey's death had been very sudden. He had seemed quite well at supper that evening, and had taken violently ill in the night. The doctor had been sent for, but the poor man had died a few minutes after the doctor's arrival. Death had been thought to be the result of eating poisoned mushrooms.

" 'Well,' I said, 'I suppose a sudden death of that kind might start tongues wagging, but surely not without some additional facts. Did you have a quarrel with Geoffrey or anything of that kind?'

"She admitted that she had had a quarrel with him on the preceding morning at breakfast time.

" 'And the servants heard it, I suppose?' I asked.

" 'They weren't in the room.'

" 'No, my dear,' I said, 'but they were probably near the door outside.'

"I knew the carrying power of Mabel's high-pitched, hysterical voice only too well. Geoffrey Denman, too, was a man given to raising his voice loudly when angry.

" 'What did you quarrel about?' I asked.

" 'Oh, the usual things. It was always the same things over and over again. Some little thing would start us off, and then Geoffrey became impossible and said abominable things, and I told him what I thought of him.'

" 'There had been a lot of quarreling, then?' I said.

" 'It wasn't my fault—'

" 'My dear child,' I said, 'it doesn't matter whose fault it was. That is not what we are discussing. In a place like this everybody's private affairs are more or less public property. You and your husband were always quarreling. You had a particularly bad quarrel one morning, and that night your husband died suddenly and mysteriously. Is that all, or is there anything else?'

" 'I don't know what you mean by anything else,' said Mabel sullenly.

" 'Just what I say, my dear. If you have done anything silly, don't for heaven's sake keep it back now. I

only want to do what I can to help you.'

"'Nothing and nobody can help,' said Mabel wildly, 'except death.'

"'Have a little more faith in Providence, dear,' I said. 'Now then, Mabel, I know perfectly well there *is* something else that you are keeping back.'

"I always did know, even when she was a child, when she was not telling me the whole truth. It took a long time, but I got it out of her at last. She had gone down to the pharmacist's that morning and had bought some arsenic. She had had, of course, to sign the book for it. Naturally, the pharmacist had talked.

"'Who is your doctor?' I asked.

"'Dr. Rawlinson.'

"I knew him by sight. Mabel had pointed him out to me the previous day. To put it in perfectly plain language, he was what I would describe as an old dodderer. I have had too much experience of life to believe in the infallibility of doctors. Some of them are clever men and some of them are not, and half the time the best of them don't know what is the matter with you. I have no truck with doctors and their medicines myself.

"I thought things over, and then I put on my bonnet and went to call on Dr. Rawlinson. He was just what I had thought him—a nice old man, kindly, vague, and so short-sighted as to be pitiful, slightly deaf, and, withal, touchy and sensitive to the last degree. He was on his high horse at once when I mentioned Geoffrey Denman's death, talked for a long time about various kinds of fungi, edible and otherwise.

"He had questioned the cook, and she had admitted that one or two of the mushrooms cooked had been 'a little queer,' but as the shop had sent them she thought they must be all right. The more she thought about them since, the more she was convinced that their appearance was unusual.

"'She would be,' I said. 'They would start by being quite like mushrooms in appearance, and they would end by being orange with purple spots. There is nothing that type of woman cannot remember if she tries.'

"I gathered that Denman had been past speech when the doctor got to him. He was incapable of swallowing, and had died within a few minutes. The doctor seemed perfectly satisfied with the certificate he had given. But how much of that was obstinacy and how much of it was genuine belief I could not be sure.

"I went straight home and asked Mabel quite frankly why she had bought arsenic.

"'You must have had some idea in your mind,' I pointed out.

"Mabel burst into tears. 'I wanted to make away with myself,' she moaned. 'I was too unhappy. I thought I would end it all.'

"'Have you the arsenic still?'

"'No, I threw it away.'

"I sat there turning things over and over in my mind.

"'What happened when he was taken ill? Did he call you?'

"'No.' She shook her head. 'He rang the bell violently. He must have rung several times. At last Dorothy, the house-parlormaid, heard it, and she waked the cook up, and they came down. When Dorothy saw him she was frightened. He was rambling and delirious. She left the cook with him and came rushing to me. I got up and went to him. Of course I saw at once he was dreadfully ill.

"Unfortunately Brewster, who looks after old Mr. Denman, was away for the night, so there was no one who knew what to do. I sent Dorothy off for the doctor, and cook and I stayed with him, but after a few minutes I couldn't bear it any longer; it was too dreadful. I ran back to my room and locked the door.'

"'Very selfish and unkind of you,' I said; 'and no doubt that conduct of yours has done nothing to help you since, you may be sure of that. Cook will have repeated it everywhere. Well, well, this is a bad business.'

"Next I spoke to the servants. The cook wanted to tell me about the mushrooms, but I stopped her. I was tired of those mushrooms. Instead, I questioned both of them very closely about their master's condition on that night. They both agreed that he seemed to be in great agony, that he was unable to swallow, and he could only speak in a strangled voice, and when he did speak it was only rambling—nothing sensible.

"'What did he say when he was rambling?' I asked curiously.

"'Something about some fish, wasn't it?' the cook said, turning to the other.

"Dorothy agreed.

"'A heap of fish,' she said; 'some nonsense like that. I could see at once he wasn't in his right mind, poor gentleman.'

"There didn't seem to be any sense to be made out of that. As a last resource I went up to see Brewster, who was a gaunt, middle-aged woman of about fifty.

"'It is a pity that I wasn't there that night,' she said. 'Nobody seems to have tried to do anything for him until the doctor came.'

"'I suppose he was delirious,' I said doubtfully; 'but that is not a symptom of ptomaine poisoning, is it?'

"'It depends,' said Brewster.

"I asked her how her patient was getting on.

"She shook her head.

"'He is pretty bad,' she said.

"'Weak?'

"'Oh, no, he is strong enough physically—all but his eyesight. That is failing badly. He may outlive all of us, but his mind is failing very fast now. I have already told both Mr. and Mrs. Denman that he ought

to be in an institution, but Mrs. Denman wouldn't hear of it.'

"I will say for Mabel that she always had a kindly heart.

"Well, there the thing was. I thought it over in every aspect, and at last I decided that there was only one thing to be done. In view of the rumors that were going about, permission must be applied for to exhume the body, and a proper post-mortem must be made and lying tongues quietened once and for all. Mabel, of course, made a fuss, mostly on sentimental grounds—disturbing the dead man in his peaceful grave, and so on—but I was firm.

"I won't make a long story of this part of it. We got the order and they did the autopsy, or whatever they call it, but the result was not so satisfactory as it might have been. There was no trace of arsenic—that was all to the good—but the actual words of the report were *that there was nothing to show by what means the deceased had come to his death.*

"So, you see, that didn't lead us out of trouble altogether. People went on talking—about rare poisons impossible to detect, and rubbish of that sort. I had seen the pathologist who had done the post-mortem, and I had asked him several questions, though he tried his best to get out of answering most of them; but I got out of him that he considered it highly unlikely that the poisoned mushrooms were the cause of death.

"An idea was simmering in my mind, and I asked him what poison, if any, could have been employed to obtain that result. He made a long explanation to me, most of which, I must admit, I did not follow, but it amounted to this: that death might have been due to some strong vegetable alkaloid.

"The idea I had was this: supposing the taint of insanity was in Geoffrey Denman's blood also, might he not have made away with himself? He had, at one period of his life, studied medicine, and he would have a better knowledge of poisons and their effects than most people.

"I didn't think it sounded very likely, but it was the only thing I could think of. And I was nearly at my wits' end, I can tell you. Now, I daresay you modern young people will laugh, but when I am in really bad trouble I always say a little prayer to myself—anywhere, when I am walking along the street, or at a bazaar. And I always get an answer. It may be some trifling thing, apparently quite unconnected with the subject, but there it is. I had that text pinned over my bed when I was a girl: *Ask and you shall receive.*

"On the morning that I am telling you about, I was walking along the High Street, and I was praying hard. I shut my eyes, and when I opened them, what do you think was the first thing that I saw?"

Five faces with varying degrees of interest were turned to Miss Marple. It may be safely assumed, however, that no one would have guessed the answer to the question right.

"I saw," said Miss Marple impressively, *"the window of the fishmonger's shop.* There was only one thing in it—*a fresh haddock."*

She looked round triumphantly.

"Oh, my God!" said Raymond West. "An answer to prayer—a fresh haddock!"

"Yes, Raymond," said Miss Marple severely, "and there is no need to be profane about it. The hand of God is everywhere. The first thing I saw were the black spots—the marks of St. Peter's thumb. That is the legend, you know. St. Peter's thumb. And that brought things home to me. I needed faith, the ever-true faith of St. Peter. I connected the two things together—faith and fish."

Sir Henry blew his nose rather hurriedly. Joyce bit her lip.

"Now what did that bring to my mind? Of course, both the cook and the house-parlormaid had mentioned fish as being one of the things spoken of by the dying man. I was convinced, absolutely convinced, that there was some solution of the mystery to be found in these words. I went home determined to get to the bottom of the matter."

She paused.

"Has it ever occurred to you," the old lady went on, "how much we go by what is called, I believe, the context? There is a place on Dartmoor called Grey Wethers. If you were talking to a farmer there and mentioned Grey Wethers, he would probably conclude that you were speaking of these stone circles, yet it is possible that you might be speaking of the atmosphere; and in the same way, if you were meaning the stone circles, an outsider, hearing a fragment of the conversation, might think you meant the weather. So when we repeat a conversation, we don't, as a rule, repeat the actual words; we put in *some other words* that seem to us to mean exactly the same thing.

"I saw both the cook and Dorothy separately. I asked the cook if she was quite sure that her master had actually mentioned a heap of fish. She said she was quite sure.

" 'Were these his exact words,' I asked, 'or did he mention some particular kind of fish?'

" 'That's it,' said the cook; 'it was some particular kind of fish, but I can't remember what now. A heap of—now what was it? Not any of the fish you send to table. Would it be a perch now—or pike? No. It didn't begin with a P.'

"Dorothy also recalled that her master had mentioned some special kind of fish. 'Some outlandish kind of fish it was,' she said.

" 'A pile of—now what was it?'

" 'Did he say heap or pile?' I asked.

" 'I think he said pile. But there, I really can't be sure—it's so hard to remember the actual words, isn't it, Miss, especially when they don't seem to make sense. But now I come to think of it, I am pretty sure that it was a pile, and the fish began with C; but it wasn't a cod, or a crayfish.'

"The next part is where I am really proud of myself," said Miss Marple, "because, of course, I don't know anything about drugs—nasty, dangerous things I call them. I have got an old recipe of my grandmother's for tansy tea that is worth any amount of your drugs.

"But I knew that there were several medical volumes in the house, and in one of them there was an index of drugs. You see, my idea was that Geoffrey had taken some particular poison, and was trying to say the name of it.

"Well, I looked down the list of H's, beginning He. Nothing there that sounded likely; then I began on the P's, and almost at once I came to —what do you think?'"

She looked round, postponing her moment of triumph.

"Pilocarpine. Can't you understand a man who could hardly speak trying to drag that word out? What would that sound like to a cook who had never heard the word? Wouldn't it convey the impression 'pile of carp?'"

"By Jove!" said Sir Henry.

"I should never had hit upon that," said Dr. Pender.

"Most interesting," said Mr. Petherick. "Really most interesting."

"I turned quickly to the page indicated in the index. I read about pilocarpine and its effect on the eyes and other things that didn't seem to have any bearing on the case, but at last I came to a most significant phrase: *Has been tried with success as an antidote for atropine poisoning.*

"I can't tell you the light that dawned on me then. I never had thought it likely that Geoffrey Denman would commit suicide. No, this new solution was not only possible, but I was absolutely sure it was the correct one—because all the pieces fitted in logically."

"I am not going to try to guess," said Raymond. "Go on, Aunt Jane, and tell us what was so startlingly clear to you."

"I don't know anything about medicine, of course," said Miss Marple, "but I did happen to know this, that when my eyesight was failing, the doctor ordered me drops with atropine sulphate in them. I went straight upstairs to old Mr. Denman's room. I didn't beat about the bush.

" 'Mr. Denman,' I said, 'I know everything. Why did you poison your son?'

"He looked at me for a minute or two—rather a handsome old man he was, in his way—and then he burst out laughing. It was one of the most vicious laughs I have ever heard. I can assure you it made my flesh creep. I had only heard anything like it once before, when poor Mrs. Jones went off her head.

" 'Yes,' he said, 'I got even with Geoffrey. I was too clever for Geoffrey. He was going to put me away, was he? Have me shut up in an asylum? I heard them talking about it. Mabel is a good girl—Mabel stuck

up for me, but I knew she wouldn't be able to stand up against Geoffrey. In the end he would have his own way; he always did. But I settled him—I settled my kind, loving son! Ha, ha! I crept down in the night. It was quite easy. Brewster was away. My dear son was asleep; he had a glass of water by the side of his bed; he always woke up in the middle of the night and drank it off.

" 'I poured it away—ha, ha!—and I emptied the bottle of eye drops into the glass. He would wake up and swill it down before he knew what it was. There was only a tablespoonful of it—quite enough, quite enough. And so he did! They came to me in the morning and broke it to me very gently. They were afraid it would upset me. Ha, ha!'

"Well," said Miss Marple, "that is the end of the story. Of course, the poor old man was put in an asylum. He wasn't really responsible for what he had done, and the truth was known, and everyone was sorry for Mabel and could not do enough to make up to her for the unjust suspicions they had had. But if it hadn't been for Geoffrey realizing what the stuff was he had swallowed and trying to get everybody to get hold of the antidote without delay, it might never have been found out. I believe there are very definite symptoms with atropine poisoning—dilated pupils of the eyes, and all that; but, of course, as I have said, Dr. Rawlinson was very short-sighted, poor old man.

"And in the same medical book which I went on reading—and some of it was *most* interesting—it gave the symptoms of ptomaine poisoning and they are not unlike—ptomaine and atropine poisoning, I mean. But I can assure you I have never seen a pile of fresh haddock without thinking of the thumb mark of St. Peter."

There was a very long pause.

"My dear friend," said Mr. Petherick. "My very dear friend, you really are amazing."

"I shall recommend Scotland Yard to come to you for advice," said Sir Henry.

"Well, at all events, Aunt Jane," said Raymond, "there is one thing that you don't know."

"Oh, yes, I do, dear," said Miss Marple. "It happened just before dinner, didn't it? When you took Joyce out to admire the sunset. It is a very favorite place, that. There by the jasmine hedge. That is where the milkman asked Annie if he could put up the banns."

"Dash it all, Aunt Jane," said Raymond, "don't spoil all the romance. Joyce and I aren't like the milkman and Annie."

"That is where you make a mistake, dear," said Miss Marple. "Everybody is very much alike, really. But fortunately, perhaps, they don't realize it."

A pair of SECOND PRIZE *stories from the* CWA *contest*

On November 15, 1965 we inaugurated a special short-story contest for members of CWA (Crime Writers Association of England). The contest closed on May 16, 1966.

Last month we gave you the winner of the First Prize—Christianna Brand's "Twist for Twist." This month we offer you two of the five Second Prize winners—Miriam Sharman's "Battle of Wits" and Colin Watson's "Return to Base."

Miriam Sharman's "Battle of Wits" has only one scene and two characters (a very important character is offstage). There is no action in the sense of chase—all the "movement" is in or directly outside a single room, as if it were a one-act play; and yet the story is packed with suspense, full of tantalizing and unexpected developments. You will feel as if you were sitting in the front row of a theater, just below the stage, on the edge of your seat, on 'tec tenterhooks, caught in a deadly and diabolical duel of wits . . .

BATTLE OF WITS

by MIRIAM SHARMAN

As the dusk of a summer evening took its reluctant departure, the Headmaster drew the curtains across the French doors and switched on the lamp, angling the shaft of light onto his desk. The room, now framed in deep shadows, suited his mood of quiet contemplation—which was almost immediately shattered by the unexpected, unremitting ringing of the doorbell.

The visitor was a tall lean man in his late forties, wearing a loose lightweight coat. He was hatless, an informality that brought a frown to the Headmaster's brow.

"You are Richard Lumsden?" the stranger asked.

At least, the Headmaster thought, the voice was that of an educated man. He nodded. "You wish to see me?"

The beam of light from the study signaled the way. The visitor entered, followed by the Headmaster, silently disapproving. They seated themselves at the desk, facing each other.

"You're a parent of one of the boys here?" Lumsden asked politely. His eyes flickered with annoyance at the other's silence. The man's pale, narrow face was expressionless, his body taut. His air of remoteness was disturbing. "School business had better be left until my successor moves in," the Headmaster said. "My authority here is at an end."

"My name is Dean."

"Dean." Lumsden echoed the name, suddenly wary.

"Gregory Dean."

"Ah, the actor!" Lumsden smiled. There was no answering smile, only the cold steady stare. Lumsden glanced toward the fireplace, then immediately regretted his instinctive reaction.

Dean was across the room in a moment, studying the framed photographs on the wall, one of which finally held his attention. He eased it off the wall with his gloved hands, brought it back to the desk, and thrust it at the Headmaster.

"The school Dramatic Society," Lumsden murmured.

Dean jabbed at the face of a fourteen-year-old boy.

"A most distressing business," the Headmaster said quietly. His relief at placing his visitor in context was lessened by the man's odd behavior. Lumsden felt impelled to elaborate. "Among younger children, of course, it is not uncommon, this petty pilfering. They grow out of it. But with a boy of fourteen—" He shook his head regretfully. "And he had been warned several times."

Dean maintained his unnerving silence. Lumsden felt the stirrings of anger. "If you have nothing to say, Mr. Dean, I must ask you to leave. I still have some odds and ends to clear up."

In his determination to sound natural he explained rather too carefully. "I'm taking a leisurely tour abroad. No doubt to you the prospect of travel is not especially attractive. But I am looking forward to it. Yes, indeed, I have a carefully planned itinerary—

"I'm sure you have," Dean interrupted curtly. "Everything according to plan. And at what stage did you plan to get rid of my boy?"

The Headmaster was taken aback by this frontal attack. "What are you talking about? Your boy is an incorrigible thief. It was unfair to the others to keep him here." He added with a note of reproof, "I wrote and told you of my decision."

"Your letter was forwarded to me in Belgrade. They put in my understudy. I flew back immediately."

Lumsden was relieved at the more rational turn of the conversation. "Well," he said mildly, "That was scarcely my responsibility."

"Your responsibility was of a very different order. Why did you not ask me to come and take the boy away quietly, without making any fuss?" Dean's voice trembled. "Why did you expel him before the whole school?"

Dean's eyes, glittering now with hostility, forced the Headmaster to choose his next words carefully. "The boy had been given previous chances—indeed, some of the masters had intervened in his behalf on several occasions. And all to no avail."

Lumsden felt his confidence returning. "His final act of defiance had to be dealt with firmly—for the boy's own sake. I have run this school in my own way. If you disapproved of my methods you had a simple remedy—to remove the boy."

"I wish to God I had." The bitter passion in the words startled Lumsden. Dean continued more quietly, "But my mistakes as a parent do not exonerate you."

"Come, come," Lumsden said in a conciliatory tone. "But I stand by my judgment. I am in no need of exoneration."

"In that last interview you had with my son," Dean said harshly, "you had him at your mercy."

The Headmaster shrugged. "A somewhat theatrical conception."

Dean's face hardened. "How many boys have you expelled from this school?"

"Not many," Lumsden replied. "Only three in twelve years."

"And how many publicly?"

"What do you mean—publicly?" the Headmaster countered. "To the assembled school? With the boy himself present? One."

"And because I am a public figure it got into the newspapers." Dean's face was bleak. "You abused your power."

The highly unsatisfactory interview had gone far enough for Lumsden. He spoke briskly, authoritatively. "If you are going to be offensive—" He stood up. "You must go—now. I have a few things to attend to before I leave for the airport."

"You're not going to the airport." The gun in the gloved hand pointed unwaveringly at Lumsden's head. "Sit down."

Slowly, incredulously, the Headmaster lowered himself into his seat.

"What did you say to my son in that final interview?"

In spite of the gun Lumsden's indignation spilled over. "Why don't you ask *him?*"

There was a short pause. The Headmaster sensed the tremor that passed through the other man's body. At the highest point of expectancy, with the timing of a good actor, Dean said, "I can't ask him. He's dead."

Lumsden stared, shocked, at the gaunt white face. Dean's bald statement seemed to have effected some kind of release. His words now flowed. "I have a small flat in London. I called there with my luggage just before coming here. And there was my son—hanging from the ceiling—dead."

There was, then, reason to fear the gun, Lumsden thought. "Dreadful," he murmured. "Poor

boy, he must have felt his disgrace keenly."

"You broke his spirit—do you hear me?—you broke his spirit!" Dean's misery was almost palpable. "Useless at games—scholastic work not high—too sensitive, too interested in the Dramatic Society. You could have helped him, but but you preferred to crucify him!"

The Headmaster suddenly perceived the flaw. "Why haven't the police been in touch with me?" he demanded.

"Because I haven't told them," Dean replied simply. "First things first. Why did you choose that particular moment and that particular manner of humiliating my son?"

Lumsden hesitated. "You think a gun will produce the answers you want to hear?"

"A trick question. The gun is for killing. You are going to kill yourself with it."

Fear was at last threading its way into the Headmaster's consciousness. "You can't force me to kill myself."

"Obviously I shall have to do the actual shooting—but the verdict will be suicide."

"If you murder me, you will be caught."

Dean shook his head. "Mistakes come from taking too many precautions. I have concentrated on only the basic ones. Nobody saw me arrive and nobody will see me leave. It is very quiet round here. I came in a very ordinary car and parked it among several other ordinary cars, about half a mile away."

"But you will be an obvious suspect because you have motive."

"You admit that!" Dean's reply was like an explosion.

Lumsden frowned at his slip. "The motive is irrational," he explained, "but it would make you their first suspect."

"Suspicion is one thing, proof another. I've been over all that in my mind." He sounded a warning note. "You have no monopoly on reason or logic."

"Believe me," the Headmaster spoke feelingly. "I do not underestimate you for one moment, but I must draw your attention to the weaknesses of your position. If you think that all you have to do is shoot me and put the gun in my hand—" He broke off. The beginnings of an idea stirred in his mind. "Why sit here and discuss it?"

Dean's reply came almost eagerly. "Because I respect your mind, with its trained thinking capacity. You have only to convince me that I cannot succeed—and you will be safe."

"I don't possess a gun," Lumsden pointed out quickly.

"It's an old service revolver, untraceable. You came across it in your final clearing up."

"And how do you propose to establish that?" the Headmaster queried.

"No need to try. That's the sort of perfectionism that leads to mis-

takes." The faint smile actually held a touch of amusement. "You and I won't be present to hear it, but I'll wager somebody will remember having glimpsed the gun —the power of suggestion is very strong."

"The inference of suicide may come readily to the police," Lumsden said, "but it will be challenged by all who know me. Using a gun would simply not occur to me—it's out of character."

"If you had a choice, perhaps. But there was the weapon to hand —quick, clean, a man's way." Dean paused and his next words came harshly. "Not like hanging. A quick death for you." His voice rose. "Not like my son's—my desperate, distracted son."

That anguish was suspect, Lumsden thought, as if Dean had remembered a line from a play. The conversation must be restored to a rational basis.

"I am the last person in the world to take my own life," the Headmaster said quietly, "especially today, my last day as head of this school. You are a man of imagination. Can't you hear what my colleagues and friends will say? 'He had planned a long tour abroad to which he was looking forward with great enthusiasm. He had the respect of his pupils and his staff. It is inconceivable that, at the close of a distinguished career, he would kill himself.' "

Lumsden had warmed up to this picture of himself. Dean's smile of disdain failed to halt him. " 'He was enjoying the knowledge of a job well done, of a successful career. He had been dedicated to his work, seeing it not as a job but as a fulfillment. He left the school with its prestige higher than at any time in its history.' "

Dean's expression was thoughtful, but the gun did not waver. He took his time before replying. "Take those same points and turn them upside down."

"Ah." Lumsden leaned forward as if enjoying the cut and thrust of the duel. Dean's response was to tighten his finger on the trigger and aim the gun more carefully. The Headmaster withdrew to his former distance across the table.

"The boys and the staff left here before noon today," Dean said. "That's common practice on the last day of a term. Yet you arranged to spend the rest of your last day alone."

"I had a great deal of clearing up to do," Lumsden said sharply.

Dean shook his head. "Surrendering yourself to memories, deeply moved by the good wishes and gifts of your colleagues and your pupils —a somewhat sentimental indulgence for a man like you. And so, as dusk approached, a sense of desolation swept over you. Years of loneliness lay ahead. You are a widower, without family, with few intimate friends. It was a mistake to have devoted yourself so exclusive-

ly to your work, to have had so few outside interests."

Dean's voice throbbed a little as he went on, "As these last minutes, amid the surroundings you loved so much, closed in, the realization swept over you that the future was without savor, that life had lost its meaning—and the gun was temptingly at hand."

Lumsden broke the spell. "It's weak. How can anyone guess what goes on in the mind of a suicide? Your boy, for instance—" His provocation was deliberate. "You are very quick to assume that it was his expulsion—"

Dean stood up suddenly, but the gun remained steady. "He left a note," he said softly. "Like all reliable suicides, he left a note, expressing his sorrow for having let me down. He mentioned your big scene with him and how you had made him feel there was no place for him—anywhere. I destroyed the note because I wanted to play down his expulsion." He paused. "You, too, are going to leave a note."

"You intend to forge my handwriting?" the Headmaster asked warily.

"You must know I wouldn't be as stupid as that. You will write the note yourself."

"You cannot force me to do that," Lumsden said firmly. "Even at the point of a gun."

It was as if his prayer had been answered. Now that he felt on the verge of victory he experienced an inner thrill of exhilaration.

Dean walked cautiously round the desk, taking up his position alongside the Headmaster. He gave his orders in a commanding voice. "Pull that pad towards you. Pick up that pen."

If the scheme now in his mind failed, Lumsden warned himself, he was a dead man. He made no move to touch the pen or the pad. Dean seemed not surprised. He placed the pad in front of the Headmaster and with his gloved hand picked up the pen which he then used to punctuate his words.

"Even in your despair, your language must be somewhat literary." Dean pondered for a few moments. "'I thought to welcome the quiet years ahead. I thought to savor a sense of fulfillment. Instead, I find the prospect bleak and empty. I prefer to cut it short.'" Dean paused. "That's not bad."

Lumsden shook his head. "Not my style—much too emotional."

"You are not yourself. There must be an indication of deep disturbance."

"They won't . . . believe it," Lumsden said, with a deliberate hesitation.

"The police can only go on the evidence, and all the evidence will point to suicide. Why should they look for any other explanation?"

The Headmaster slumped dejectedly into his chair. Dean looked down on him with grim satisfac-

tion. He thrust the pen forward. "Write as I dictate. Write!"

Lumsden let his words come out angrily. "Why should I? If I write this note you will kill me."

Dean looked at his watch. "There's not much time left. The scene has gone on too long." He pressed the gun to Lumsden's right temple. At the touch of the cold metal on his flesh the Headmaster shuddered.

"It's a psychological impossibility," Dean pursued relentlessly, "to reject even a few minutes more of life. You will write because you feel the touch of death, because—who knows?—the time it takes you to write that note might be vital to you. Something could happen to save you—a ring at the door . . ."

He paused with theatrical timing and it was as if both men were suspended, expecting just such a thing to happen. But there was utter silence.

With apparent hopelessness, as Dean's finger curled round the trigger, the Headmaster slowly accepted the pen which was thrust into his right hand. Dean sighed as Lumsden wrote the dictated farewell.

"That's good," Dean murmured, "that unsteady handwriting indicates a man in a highly emotional state."

The Headmaster, keyed up to the crucial moment, put down the pen.

"There," said Dean pleasantly. "That wasn't so difficult, was it?" He tore off the sheet bearing the farewell message and laid it alongside the pad.

Now, thought Lumsden. With quick, controlled movement he picked up the pen with his left hand and rewrote the farewell note on the fresh top sheet.

Dean, perplexed, tense, stood watching. His eyes flickered warily. "So," he said. "Something I didn't think of—you're left-handed." But he sounded doubtful.

With his right hand Lumsden tore off the top sheet and placed the two suicide notes side by side in front of him. Dean looked carefully first at one, then the other.

"That's the one," he pointed. "The left-handed one."

It had started to work, the Headmaster thought, his scheme had started to work. "How can you tell?" he asked, keeping all triumph out of his voice. "Both notes are legible."

"You're bluffing," Dean said quickly. "You're right-handed. If you'd been left-handed, I'd have noticed."

"There was nothing for you to notice. I haven't used either hand since I planned this piece of mystification."

Dean peered into the shadowy corners of the study.

"You'll get no help from this room," Lumsden said. "All my personal papers are already in storage. Only the clothes I need for my trip and some of my books are here.

Even the labels on those suitcases in the corner were typed by my secretary. There is not a single specimen of my handwriting in this room."

He had difficulty in controlling his exultation at taking over the initiative.

"This trick hasn't saved you." Dean sounded confident. "When I've killed you, I'll have time to search the room. I'll find something to—"

The Headmaster interrupted. "You want to check these drawers?" He indicated the desk.

"You'd like me to give you a chance to grab this gun."

"I've no use for weapons of violence," Lumsden said severely. "I'm fighting you with my intellect, and my intellect has pointed out the serious flaw in your juvenile plan of vengeance."

There was just a hint of desperation in Dean's voice. "The main thing is, I've got the note. When you're dead I'll use the one I think best." His gloved finger curled round the trigger.

Lumsden braced himself. "Are you quite sure?" he asked grimly, "that you're in the right position for the kill?" He did not dare make any sudden movement. "If you don't know for certain," he went on with deliberation, "whether I'm right- or left-handed, how can you know which side to shoot from?"

There was no reply from Dean. Then, after an eternity, the Headmaster knew the gun had been lowered. He waited a few seconds before cautiously turning his head, raising his eyes to glimpse Dean's face. It looked so different from the face of the man who had sat opposite him that he almost exclaimed aloud. The face had become a mask of total weariness.

Lumsden watched, fascinated, as Dean, the gun now dangling from his hand, walked slowly round the desk, sat down, and leaned forward slightly as if needing support; his body was crumpling visibly.

The Headmaster seasoned his relief with warnings of caution. His superior intellectual power had triumphed, but Dean's hand still hovered near the gun on the desk in front of him.

"Tomorrow," Lumsden murmured, "you will be grateful to me —grateful that you did not commit the ultimate crime."

He had the impression that Dean did not even hear these sympathetic words, that in some odd sort of way Dean was beyond communication.

Lumsden raised his voice as if to penetrate the barrier. "I am not a vindictive man, so I shall make no charge. I don't want my traveling plans disrupted by police inquiries."

He glanced at his watch. He had less than twenty minutes in which to get rid of his unwelcome visitor —and the sooner the better, before he inadvertently revealed whether he was right-handed or left-handed.

Dean's deep sigh seemed to come from another world.

"Please—" His voice was little more than a croak as he indicated the carafe of water. "A drink?"

Lumsden just prevented himself from reaching for the glass. "Help yourself," he said shortly.

The water revived Dean a little, but his eyes were puzzled as he peered round the room. Lumsden could even feel a twinge of pity for the man.

"You must go now, Mr. Dean. I promise you will hear no more of this." He eased himself effortlessly into his thinking habits. "Try to see your son's death in the whole. There's no saying what further sorrow he might have caused you. The seeds of delinquency were in him."

Wrapped up in his own vindication, Lumsden's voice was persuasive. "I knew all about him, you see—his unwholesome devotion to one of the masters and to Bowen, the Head Boy. We have to be on the alert for things of that sort in a boys' school. I let him know what I suspected, and naturally I could not tolerate a new Headmaster inheriting a situation in the least doubtful. So I made an example—" He stopped suddenly. He had let himself be carried away. Had he said too much?

It was Dean who eventually broke the silence. "Forgive me," he said apologetically. "I haven't really taken in all that. It made no sense to me, but I hesitated to interrupt you."

Lumsden swallowed his astonishment as the other man again looked round the shadowy room.

"Before I try to explain, would you make a telephone call for me?" Dean asked.

Lumsden stiffened. "That is asking rather a lot," he replied sharply.

"It is important." The visitor was almost pleading. "May I make it myself?"

The Headmaster nodded. The other man drew the telephone toward him, his lower arm resting on the gun. He seemed not to notice this—indeed, he seemed not to notice anything, to be troubled, diffident, drained of all emotion.

"St. Andrew's Hospital?" His voice was weary. "Dr. Boyce, please . . . George Denham." He kept his eyes lowered.

"St. Andrews, the private mental hospital?" Lumsden asked the question, already anticipating the answer.

His visitor nodded. He spoke into the receiver. "Dr. Boyce. Yes, it is. Please send quickly." He raised his eyes to Lumsden. "What is this place?"

"Michelson's School, Parkway."

The visitor repeated the name and address into the phone, then hung up. "I'm a patient there," he said. "Have been for nearly two years."

"Schizophrenia?" Lumsden queried cautiously.

The other shrugged. "That's the label. How long will it take a car to get here from St. Andrew's?"

"Ten to fifteen minutes."

Lumsden tried to tidy up his disordered thoughts. "I'll have a word with the doctor when he calls for you," he said sympathetically.

"They send a male nurse with the driver—the doctor doesn't come himself."

Lumsden raised an eyebrow. "It's happened to you before?—this sort of thing, I mean."

"Three times—no, four." He sounded indifferent. "I can't remember." As he leaned back wearily in his chair he noticed the gun on the desk. "I—I brought this—did I?" he stammered.

"You threatened me with it." Much as the Headmaster would have liked to take possession of the gun, he felt he must not yet make any obvious movement with either hand.

"Nonviolent," the visitor murmured, "up till now. This is the first time . . ." His voice trailed off in despair.

"Don't give up hope," Lumsden said. "Medical science is making remarkable strides these days. What did you do for a living, Mr.—?"

"Denham—George Denham." He stirred restlessly, looked at his watch, strained his ears for the sound of a car. "Why are you so interested in me?"

"You came here impersonating the father of one of my boys and you were determined to kill me for some imaginary grievance. Don't you remember something of that?"

"No, nothing." His voice sounded hopeless. He gripped his head between his hands. "Let me try. I can remember having tea in the dining room—bread and butter and fruitcake. Then I was one of the first in the lounge, so I got a comfortable chair." He slowed down with the intensified effort at concentration. "I picked up a newspaper—the *Chronicle,* I think it was. I started to read it." With a sigh he gave up. "Nothing after that—nothing."

Lumsden longed to believe him and thus restore young Dean to life. "When you found yourself sitting here," he asked, "at what moment did you cease to be the obsessed parent and become the wandering hospital patient?"

"It isn't like that—not like a photographic shutter, one minute open, the next moment closed. There's a sort of no man's land."

"Where could you get a gun?"

"I don't know." The visitor took a wallet from his inside pocket, extracted some banknotes. "I could have bought it, I suppose—I should have more money than this."

Lumsden, nearly convinced that George Denham was genuine, asked the key question. "How did you know young Dean had been expelled?"

"Expelled? Poor kid—"

Lumsden mustered all his quiet authority. "How did you know to come here? That's the crux of it. You're faking, you must be!"

The visitor blinked. He seemed more confused than intimidated. "I —I—" He began to go through his coat pockets, bringing out a freshly laundered handkerchief and a newspaper clipping.

It took a tremendous effort of will on the Headmaster's part not to reach for the handkerchief. The visitor pushed it across the desk.

"Initials, G.D. George Denham."

"Or Gregory Dean," Lumsden said abruptly.

The visitor shrugged as if everything was now beyond him. He looked at his watch. "They should be here," he muttered.

"You must have some means of identification on you," Lumsden insisted.

"I expect so." The visitor gave this a moment's thought as he was about to stuff the newspaper clipping back into his pocket. Something in it caught his eye. He held the paper out to Lumsden who, still on his guard, took it with both hands.

> The celebrated actor, Gregory Dean, flew in from Belgrade today. His son, Christopher, was recently expelled from Michelson's School.

Lumsden's suspicions flooded back. "There's nothing here about the boy's suicide," he said sharply.

"Suicide?" The visitor's shocked expression was almost immediately replaced by pity. "You mustn't blame yourself," he said compassionately.

"How could you have invented the suicide and the note?" Lumsden desperately wanted the reassurance that young Dean was still alive, that there would be no inquest to upset his future plans.

The visitor licked his dry lips. His face twitched. "I—I did that? I caused you such pain?" He sighed. "I identify very, very intensively with the personalities I assume. Something starts me off—this time, possibly, the same initials . . ." Suddenly he stood up. "There it is—the car." His movements were hurried now.

Lumsden decided on a final challenge. "I'll come with you to the hospital and have a word with the doctor."

"Yes, yes, do that . . .if you wish."

The Headmaster hesitated. If he went to the hospital now, he would have to reorganize all his travel arrangements, a difficult thing to do at this time of year. The man had surely established his identity.

"You're not coming?" The visitor was already in the hall. "You'll get in touch with the hospital?"

"Yes. When I return from abroad." Through the open study door the Headmaster watched him leave. He thought he heard the faint sound of a car. What was it the visitor had said about the power of suggestion?

Suddenly Lumsden realized he was trembling and soaked in perspiration. He found some brandy

in a cupboard. It restored him to near normality. Something glinting on the carpet near the desk caught his eye. He picked it up. It was a few seconds before he recognized it —a stick of grease paint.

He found the telephone number in the directory. "St. Andrew's? Dr. Boyce. It's urgent."

The reply came crisply. "Are you sure you have the right number? No doctor of that name here."

"A patient, then," Lumsden almost shouted, "named George Denham." He kept the receiver to his ear. His glance fell on the ridiculous suicide notes. The newspaper clipping still lay on the desk.

The gun? Where was the gun?

"No patient of that name," the crisp voice announced.

Lumsden slammed down the receiver. At the same moment his eyes were drawn to the curtains across the French doors. One gloved hand was parting them, the other was holding the gun.

It was clear to Lumsden that Dean, from that vantage point, had watched him pour a drink, pick up the grease paint, use the directory, make a phone call—all with his right hand!

And now Dean was moving purposefully round the desk into the right position—for the kill.

Second SECOND PRIZE story from CWA contest

Colin Watson's "Return to Base" is written with rare distinction, with a magic quality of mood, place, and emotion. Like Miriam Sharman's Second Prize story, also in this issue, Colin Watson's has only two important characters (again with one leading character offstage). But there is more than one scene, and more action in the physical sense.

Also like Miss Sharman's, Mr. Watson's story could be a one-act play; it is equally full of suspense, though of an entirely different kind from Miss Sharman's; and while there is what might be called a "battle of wits," its impact and meaning and "texture" are again altogether different . . .

In other words, two stories, alike in some ways, yet worlds apart—illustrating again the startling contrast to be found in the warp and woof of today's detective-crime-mystery short story . . . Yes, there are superficial resemblances, similarities in underlying techniques; but a hundred modern mystery stories, or a thousand, can offer a hundred or a thousand different reading experiences. The basic principles and patterns always persist—as they have persisted these past 126 years; but the genre as a whole has an infinite capacity for variation—and it is this infinite variety that will preserve the form, and guarantee that the mystery short story will last forever . . .

RETURN TO BASE

by COLIN WATSON

IT WAS THE LOOK OF THE MONEY that broke his long dream of a return. The sight of the first handful of change from a pound note. Note, not bill. That he remembered.

He looked down at the heavy, elaborately fashioned coins. There were fewer than he had expected. But dreams take no account of rising prices. A fourpenny cup of English coffee was doubtless as dead as the five-cent cigar.

Half a crown. That was the big one, with the thick milled edge and Latin words and a shield and heraldic lions. A wheel that had rolled out of history. He ran his thumbnail over the corrugated rim. A beer and

twenty tight-packed British—no, English—cigarettes, very white, with a thin, acrid fume, exactly the same color as his airman's tunic. And some change.

"Give me a pack of those, will you?" He pointed, unable to remember the name, then automatically recalled something else. "Please."

He put the half crown on the counter and made a question with the rest of the coins on his open palm.

"Five and five, sir."

The money was slicked away into the cash register and he was left alone, unnoticed. Well, why not? The world was just one long street now. Nationality was no more noticed than the color of one's eyes. Even the English, it seemed to him, were too preoccupied to pretend their famous magnanimous surprise at the existence of foreigners. A sort of beavers' peace prevailed everywhere.

Professionally watchful behind his busy-ness, the barman noted that the thin, worried-looking American was shaking his head as he grappled uncertainly with the cellophane wrapping on the packet of cigarettes he had just bought. The barman reached for the packet, deftly skinned and returned it, and smiled. He was a little afraid that the man's nervousness might swell into something odd, and bad for trade.

"A bit different from what you're used to, sir."

"I guess so. Thanks."

The American lit one of the cigarettes and inhaled resolutely. He suppressed the immediate desire to cough, and tried again. This time he shut his eyes and tried to will the effect he had wanted—to draw through the long tube of the years the curiously exhilarating compound of mist and smoke and frost that had hung in the dawn above an East Anglian runway.

It didn't work. The smoke tasted stale and scented; there was a feminine second-handedness about it, redolent of dance-hall powder rooms or of a car lately emptied of a necking party.

He crushed out the cigarette and turned to go. He caught sight of the barman's reminding gesture toward the packet on the counter. With a nod he made its abandonment a bequest.

The barman watched the closing door and stirred coffee for his next customer. Thoughtfully he slid the cigarettes into the pouch of his apron. "They like to be liked, don't they?" The customer grinned.

The American's mind fastened on the next two facts in the line of his purpose. He had to get to King's Cross station. And taxis were expensive. Almost expertly, he found his way by Underground.

There was no point in hanging around London. His journey had nothing to do with nostalgia. Even the flight, for which he had saved so long, had failed to register as an experience. It had been no more than

a numb wait between the closing and reopening of a door.

He asked about trains to Emblestone. The name came as easily to him as if it were a New Jersey commuters' suburb.

"Emblestone?" The clerk peered at him doubtfully.

"It's the station for Carding Down. There's—there used to be an air base there."

The clerk leaned away for hidden consultation. When he faced the window again, he held a book of timetables.

"There is an Emblestone, apparently. But that line's closed now. I'd say that Peterborough's your best bet." He sounded like a reluctant seller of lottery tickets.

"Okay. Peterborough."

"There'll probably be a bus or something."

"Sure."

"Return, sir?" The clerk waited, eyeing the queue behind.

For a long, absurdly impotent moment the traveler stood clutching the notes he had taken from his breast pocket. The quiet, almost indifferent question echoed round his brain like a challenge on the borders of death.

"Are you coming back, I mean?" The clerk had tried vainly to think up some acceptably American version of "return."

The man started. "I'm sorry . . . No, just a one-way ticket. That'll be fine." He leaned down, ready to pay.

At Peterborough he hired a car. Long and confusing formalities were involved before he was allowed to drive, tensely aware of the task's wrong-sided difficulty, into the thronged, narrow streets. Until he was clear of the city he kept in second gear. The car felt small and rigid about him, its engine feverish and frighteningly responsive.

Carefully he bored through the husk of the suburbs, heading east.

In the open country he relaxed a little and let the car roll along in high. The straight fenland road arrowed ahead into a landscape of black earth, parceled meticulously between parallels of hedge and dike. Flatness, relieved only by distant smoke puffs of trees and a dozen steeples that spiked the sky's edge in lavender silhouette, gave a sense of huge distance and universal immobility.

He passed a scarlet tractor that seemed fixed in the furrows like a monument. The farm truck that he had noticed a couple of miles farther along the road neither approached nor receded. The only tokens of motion were crows and curlews banking and sideslipping across the great ivory sky like wind-blown pages of burned books.

He had not eaten for twelve hours. More. It was now well past midday. But the thought of food did not occur to him. His mind was abandoned, in what amounted to an almost langourous acceptance of physical weariness and hunger, to

the contemplation of what he had set himself to do.

At ten minutes to three he arrived in the village of Great Carding. He drove to the end of the main street, round two corners of the church into the green, and over a humped stone bridge.

The inn was unchanged except for fresh, more garish paint on its timbering and a string of colored lights across the top of the porch. Its familiarity startled him. As he pulled round into the graveled yard, he saw that the wall nearest the river was still streaked with ivy and bright bronze lichens.

He went at once to look at the white-lettered board above the door.

Herbert Coppin, licensed to retail beer, wines, and spirits in accordance with . . .

Coppin. Not dead. Not moved away.

He bowed his head and breathed in slowly. At the end of the breath came a deep shudder, as if he had worn himself out with weeping.

The oaken darkness of the bar-room smelled of snuff and wet clay. Copper gleamed here and there among the rafters, sending back the light from a single-element electric fire perched in the great brick chimney corner.

The last of the morning customers had gone. Behind the bar, turned half away as he gently, dreamily polished a glass, was a man with massive shoulders.

"Mr. Coppin?"

The shoulders swung unhurriedly round. The American saw a broad, countryman's face, its high color dark as pottery in the shadowed recess of the bar. Again, as when the inn had come into sight, he felt immediately the shock of reconnection with the past. He looked straight into the publican's eyes, certain of answering recognition; but they showed only patience and mild curiosity, the acquired calm of the server of liquor.

"My name's . . ." It was ridiculous, like re-introducing himself to an old neighbor. "My name's Reider —Lou Reider."

Coppin nodded slowly. He smiled at the glass that he had not ceased to revolve around the wadded towel. "Reider. Aye, of course."

He turned to put the glass on a shelf. Then his hand was open across the bar. "How are you, Lou? It's been a long time."

Reider had known he would speak like this. No haste, no gush. Each word carefully chosen and presented, like a special object.

Coppin poured him whiskey straight from the bottle. Reider could not remember his ever having dispensed a drink, even a free drink, without putting it through a measure; the favor moved him.

"It *was* whiskey, wasn't it?"

"Sure." So it was. Nothing else in those days.

"Have you been over here long?"

"Not long. Seven, eight o'clock, maybe."

"What, this morning, you mean?"

"Today, yes." He saw that Coppin was surprised.

"So you came straight on up here?"

"More or less."

Coppin watched him take two small sips of the whiskey.

"I wanted to see you," Reider said. "That's the only reason why I'm in England." He stared into his glass, tilting it gently from side to side. "It's about Betty."

There was a long silence. Each man seemed to be waiting helplessly, awed by the thought of what the other might say next.

Then Coppin leaned back a little from the bar and eased a thick silver watch from his waistcoat pocket.

"I'd better close up."

He lumbered off, frowning. Reider heard the rattle of bolts at the door by which he had entered, then the publican's slow steps along a stone passage to the rear of the house.

When Coppin returned, he sat down by the table to which Reider had brought his drink. His breathing was labored; the effort to control it gave his mouth a tightness, like a suppressed smile.

"You've—you've not heard any more, I suppose," Reider asked.

Coppin said nothing. Even a gesture of confirmation seemed pointless. His eyes remained steady, waiting.

"You and her mother—"

"The wife died five years ago."

"Oh." He paused and looked down. "I'm sorry. It's just that I wondered what you both thought —what difference it made."

"I can't tell you. We never really talked about it."

"No." Reider raised his eyes. He gazed at the old man's thin rumple of yellowish-gray hair. "You, though—what do *you* think happened to her?"

Coppin made no answer. He spaced the thick finger ends of one hand along the table edge and watched them gently caress the black polished wood.

"There's something you've got to know," Reider said. "I didn't say anything about it at the time. Maybe I should have but—oh, I don't know —it was five, six days before the police came round the base and questioned all the fellows. I just shook my head with the rest. That seemed to finish it. I guess at that age it's easy to mistake the beginning of something for its end."

Coppin went on stroking the edge of the table. He seemed scarcely to be listening.

"That night when—when Betty didn't come home . . ." The rest of the sentence was like a door facing a man too encumbered to open it.

The fingers stopped moving. Coppin waited a moment before looking up. Then he said, "Yes?"

"She was with me."

The old man nodded calmly. "And so?"

Now words poured out of Reider.

"I've often thought about it. That night. I think she was ill. Or hurt. That might have been it. Over the years the thing shifts and changes shape. Bits of dreams get drawn in and grow. You come to wonder about things you couldn't have even imagined at first. You keep scratch, scratch, scratching away at the possibilities and all the time they become more horrible.

"And they sort of change into memories. Real memories. Things you believe have actually happened to you. You wake up in the morning and the first thing you know is that you're telling yourself: I'm the guy—me. It's your very first thought, morning after morning. And every time it scares you sick. Every time.

"And then you think: yeah, but that was five years ago. Or ten. Or twenty. But it makes no difference. Every morning it's like something you've only just found out."

Coppin was looking not at Reider but toward the dark, timbered wall beyond. His breathlessness had passed and the big body was quite still. When he spoke it was with the quiet, courteous patience of country habit.

"You asked just now what I think happened to Betty. Well, I'll tell you. I think she went off with some fellow she'd fallen for. Maybe to London, Birmingham—you know, some big city or other. Then she got killed in a raid. Before she could get in touch again, I mean. She would have done that sooner or later. We got on all right—the wife and me and Betty. So that's what must have happened."

Reider frowned at his empty glass. He wondered if he were slightly drunk. "In an air raid? You think she was killed in an air raid?"

"It's all there is to think. All there's ever been."

"But you don't really believe that, do you? I've been trying to tell you —can't you understand. It was me who was with her that night."

The old man's bulk heaved and subsided resignedly. "Twenty years, Lou. It's a very long time. One night and another night—what's the difference? People forget."

"No! Oh, no . . ." Desperation began to rise in him.

"But they do—they sort of melt into each other. Look, I'm not saying she did anything wrong, but Betty would go out with a different lad every night. Another thing—you talked about her being ill or something. She never had a day's sickness. Never."

"She was hurt. And it *was* that night. My God, I ought to know!"

Reider's outburst left a wavering resonance among the bottles on a glass shelf behind the bar. He listened to it, wondering if it was just a sound in his own head. Then he heard Coppin's voice.

"Hurt? How do you mean?"

"I—I think I might have hurt her. Her neck. Not meaning to. I wouldn't have done that. But it happens

sometimes that a girl gives you the wrong idea—or you just get the wrong idea anyway, never mind how—and you end up feeling mad. Oh, it's stupid as hell. Like playing at God just because you're in uniform. That's stupid, too, but it's part of it. And booze—that's another part."

"You'd been drinking?"

"Sure I'd been drinking," Reider said wearily. "Could you see me dating anybody sober?"

Suddenly Coppin felt that he and this shriveled, middle-aged man in his crumpled suit and dusty shoes had been talking of people he had never known, who had never existed as far as he was concerned. A young airman. A girl. Laughing and quarreling in a village lane in the wartime darkness. What was it to do with him?

"We'd been for a walk," Reider went on, "out to that bit of forest on the other side of the base. Something-or-other Woods, they called it. I didn't have a late pass but there was a place where we could get back into camp. She came in with me and we sat around a while out there near the end of the East runway, and she was very sweet—you know?—and I had to get damned stupid, and kind of rough with her. Just for seconds.

"You kind of stop thinking, just for seconds, like losing hold of a wheel or something. Then I was on my own and listening to the noise she made in the grass, going away from me, and then a Flying Fort came in to land and I couldn't hear her any more after that."

Reider stared a long while at his hands before looking up again.

"You know something?" The eyes seemed to crave belief.

Coppin waited for the lie.

"I've wondered sometimes—now and again at first, then every damned day in life—I've wondered if I didn't hear her fall just as that Fort was coming in."

"Fall?"

"Trip and fall." Reider gestured with his hand. The action suggested a plunging bird.

"I don't quite—"

"You wouldn't know the place I'm talking about. There's something there that I remembered afterwards. I want to show you."

The old man shook his head.

"But you've got to let me. It's why I've come back after all these years. Can't you see that?"

"But what good would it do?"

Reider brought up both hands, held them there a moment as if to clutch forth words. Foreigners, thought Coppin inconsequentially, they always wave when they talk.

The hands fell.

"Please," Reider said quietly. "Please won't you come with me? Now."

Again the old man shook his head, but he pushed back his chair and got up. He went in front of Reider to the door. Before opening it he took down a blue cloth cap and carefully smoothed it over his

sparse, tousled hair. Reider thought how bowed he looked, how slow and vulnerable.

Half a mile from the village, tilled fields and cottages and gardens came to an end on the edge of the great gray scar of the abandoned airfield. Its boundary was a high thorn hedge in which the rusty remnants of steel-wire fencing hung like red creeper.

Reider drove slowly along the lane that skirted the western side of the airfield. The first two gaps in the hedge that once had given on to service roads were now blocked with rubble and old oil drums. The third, nearly twenty yards wide, was clear enough for the car to get through. Only when Reider had steered past the littered wreckage of a blockhouse and a heap of rotting, wire-enwrapped trestles, did he realize that this had been the main entrance to the base, busy then as a city street, white-lined, neat, a-clatter with the crisp footfalls of boys in men's uniform.

"They'll not clear this, not in a hundred years," murmured Coppin at his side. "They say they're nine foot thick, those runways."

Before them lay an immense checkerboard of concrete, moss-stained and dappled with shallow pools. From its narrow fissures brown grass had grown. The grass was tall but it looked lifeless.

The car traveled diagonally across the vast square. The place was strewn with chunks of concrete, some as big as suitcases. Avoiding them demanded concentration, but Reider spared a glance now and then through the side windows of the car, as if to take bearings.

He saw, far off, the long featureless rectangles of the hangars, sinister geometrical anomalies in the wilderness. He saw the turfed mounds of the old bunkers. He glimpsed against the sky the frame of the control tower, bereft of glass and most of its paneling, like the skeleton of a carousel.

They were off the square and turning onto the main runway. The old man stared in front of him, bewildered. He had never seen the runway before. From here it looked limitless. A gigantic road with its own horizon. Lonely and purposeless. And he hated it.

The concrete rolling back beneath them was still faintly marked with the great red and yellow arrows that Reider once had watched streak past the belly of the Flying Fortress bearing him and his young good luck back from a raid on Germany. He had poured death on cities jauntily, a boy up-tipping a bucket of slops in the night.

Reider stopped the car at the edge of the runway just before the point at which its surface crumbled and merged with rank grass and brambles. He got out and stared anxiously across to their left.

"We'll have to walk from here. Not far."

He swayed slightly, Coppin noticed. And there was a grayness about his mouth. The old man went to him and laid a hand lightly on his arm. He felt it shiver.

"Hadn't we better go back? I mean, it's not likely to do any good, is it?"

For an instant Reider looked at him with anguished exasperation. Then he turned and began clumsily picking his way through the long grass. Coppin, ponderous but more sure-footed, followed him.

They went on for about a hundred yards, the ground rising slightly all the way. Reider stopped and looked about him intently. At the sight of a cluster of yellow-painted pipes, jutting from a bed of weeds, he nodded and bore off to the right.

"This is where we were. Just here."

The old man stood beside him. His shoulders were hunched with the effort of drawing breath.

Reider pointed. "You see, anybody in the dark going that way—without knowing, I mean—look, I'll show you." He walked on.

"NO!"

Reider turned and stared. The cry had been one of pent-up fear. He came back and seized the old man's arm.

"We've got to see. We've got to make sure."

"I don't want to! Let it be, for God's sake!"

"Please!" He pulled Coppin forward.

"But they looked—they looked for weeks."

"Not everywhere." The words sounded hard, wrought from knowledge.

Coppin stopped resisting. Between gasps for breath the low gabbled phrases of appeal became incoherent.

"Hold on." The grip on his arm halted the old man. Reider took another step and knelt. He pulled aside clumps of long grass.

Coppin saw a sill of moldering brick. It rimmed the dark mouth of a pit, four or five feet wide.

Reider dragged away more of the overgrowth. He worked fiercely, as though glad of the barbed punishment of hawthorn and bramble, until the whole opening was clear.

Coppin watched him all the time, using Reider's back as a shield against seeing what lay beneath.

When he had finished, Reider crouched against the sill, gripping it and peering down.

Coppin remained still, a little way behind him.

"Can't see from here." Reider stood. There was blood where he had grasped the bricks. He went to the left-hand side of the pit mouth where part of the structure had collapsed into a steep ramp of earth and rubble. He began to climb down.

Coppin stared unseeingly over the flat, mist-veiled landscape. He looked like a man beside an open grave whom grief had at the last frozen into mindlessness.

In the bottom of the pit Reider leaned back against one of the three undamaged walls. Intense cold struck at once into his shoulders, arms, and hands. For several minutes he remained pressed rigidly against the seeping brickwork. The air was thin and sour.

His gaze was fixed on a point low on the wall directly opposite. What he saw was a semicircular arch, framing blackness, the vent of some kind of culvert or drain. He was still watching it when, without consciousness of effort, he found that he had stepped forward and was slowly crossing the weed-tangled floor. For the second time in his life.

The old man did not hear the shout when it came.

"Mr. Coppin!"

Reider waited, then called again.

"Mr. Coppin!"

In the echoing confinement of the pit the cry crowded back into his own ear. It was like the wail of a terrified child.

Reider climbed a little way up the ramp until he could see the old man's head against the sky. He drew breath to shout a third time.

The name, though—he couldn't think of the name.

At that moment Coppin turned a little. Reider saw his face. He remembered that he had been about to call out. It was just as well that he hadn't, he thought. The old man was a complete stranger. And weeping.

Pulling himself forward by roots and tussocks, Reider dragged himself from the pit as wearily as if he had been imprisoned there for years. When he reached the level grass above, he remained on hands and knees for nearly five minutes, his breathing quick and shallow, his head down like an animal's. Then he got to his feet.

He felt terribly tired and cramped. But he knew the first thing he ought to do was to be kind to the old man standing silent before him. What was he crying about, for God's sake?

Reider went closer, staring, until the glistening lines down the old man's cheeks filled his vision. Strings of half-dried tears, tenuous, unaccountable. Absolutely unaccountable. Like the pale fronds of that skeletal foot, sprouting from the culvert's mouth.

He put an arm round Coppin's shoulders and smiled wonderingly into his face.

"Say, you're new here, aren't you? So shall I tell you what we're going to do? We're going over right now to that canteen and have a drink. War or no goddam war."

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 306th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a "first story" with an interesting background—and a solid example of how a new writer transmutes first-hand observation and experience into contemporary fiction.

The author, Robert Ladner, Jr., was 21 when he wrote "Choice of Evils," and a senior at Gettysburg College, majoring in Sociology (significant!) and Anthropology. He has traveled and worked in more than half the states of the Union, "employed in capacities ranging from newspaper reporter to photographer to commercial artist to detective's assistant and from horticulturist to ditch digger." He based his "first story" on what he learned while working his way through his junior year as a mechanic and "gas jockey."

Mr. Ladner described his aspirations in an interesting way: "When I was a kid in North Philadelphia I used to sit for hours in the local barber shop and read magazines. One day I ran across a cartoon depicting structural steel workers eating lunch about two or three miles above the street, and mixed in among the peanut-butter-and-jelly and bologna sandwiches was one character whose lunch pail folded out into a complete white-linen seven-course meal complete with candelabra. One of his buddies pointed, saying. 'Now there's *a real Renaissance man!'*

"The cartoon haunts me yet. I am aiming for the Ministry, not structural steel, but the originality, the verve, the vitality of the 'Renaissance man' nags along the back of my mind, goading me toward that same brand of constructively unconventional thought and action."

We'll hear more from Mr. Robert Ladner, Jr.—you can bet on it!

CHOICE OF EVILS

by ROBERT LADNER, Jr.

PAUL TUGGED THE BASEBALL CAP over his gray crew-cut, then jammed his hands deep into his overall pockets, pulling his neck in against the cold draft of air that accompanied Clete's disgusted entrance into the gas-station office.

"Would you believe?" said Clete.

"Cadillac a block long and all it wanted was a buck's worth of regular."

The additional sagging of Paul's body as he leaned against the counter top was his only comment. Clete crossed over to the cash register and rang up the sale, digging the green stamps out of his pocket and tossing them on the counter. He settled his lanky frame on the window sill and glanced at his watch.

"Slow," he said.

Paul nodded absently.

Outside a woman in a red Corvair turned sharply at the traffic light and headed in toward the west island. Clete swung his feet to the floor as she hit the first alarm cord, then relaxed as she hit the second, third, and fourth, racing past the gas islands and back into the street on the other side of the intersection. Clete lifted his feet back on the window sill and stared out the window.

"Looks like rain," he said hopefully. Rain meant a waiver of the necessity of washing windshields.

"Mmph." To Paul rain meant fewer customers and another Wednesday night chalking up more figures in the red column of his logbook. "Dammit," he said wearily, "if it isn't one thing it's another. Business is bad enough without rain making it worse."

"Maybe it won't rain," Clete said diplomatically.

"Weatherman said tonight would be clear."

The first drops began to splatter on the enameled tops of the gas pumps—big drops, fat globules of water, then smaller drops hissing on the macadam station surface and splashing on the signboards, darkening the cement island runways.

"Better get your bike in," said Paul.

Clete nodded and moved to the garage door, yanking upward on the frayed rope, bringing the shuddering portcullis off the ground and overhead. He stepped outside, head bowed against the rain, and wheeled the bicycle inside.

"Seat's wet," he observed.

"Close the door," Paul snapped. "You want you should bankrupt me?" Grinning, Clete reached up and grabbed the rope, bringing the door rumbling down, slowing it with a last-minute reverse tug on the rope.

A blue Mercury sped up to the traffic light, tires chirping as the driver downshifted to brake the car. The motor snarled when the light changed, sending the car slewing around the corner, accelerating in a squeal of tires and a haze of exhaust.

"Damn kids." Paul fished in his pocket for a cigarette, lit one, then flipped the match in the general direction of the wastebasket. "They'll drive me right out of business."

"Punks?"

"Yeah, most of them. Lawler, Gates, Bradley—hell, they all've been in jail one time or another.

Johnny Turk's brother's gonna keep the cops hopping for a year. Trouble is, I tried to give the kids a break, you know, give 'em a place to work on their cars and all. But no, that wasn't enough. They stole my tools, loused up my oil, used the bays for their carburetor-switching parties, got the police all hot and bothered. Drove half my good customers away. Won't hardly nobody come around here to buy gas any more."

"January's a slow month anyway," Clete said sympathetically.

"Yeah, but this slow?" Paul jabbed a finger at the register. "Less than a hundred bucks since we opened this morning. Hell, operating expenses eat up twice the profit in that. Costs fifty-five dollars to run this place every day, and that's gotta come out of the profits. We don't make more'n a nickel on the gallon, that's fifteen cents on the dollar. So we made maybe fifteen dollars today, and spent fifty-five. That means so far forty bucks in the hole. With luck, by the time we close tonight, it might be only twenty-five or thirty. But that's all pure loss."

Clete thought for a minute, feeling vaguely guilty about the dollar-fifty an hour he was getting. "Can't you get out?"

"Can't until at least May. Blasted franchise contract says I have to stay in business for a full year, barring fire or theft. If the place gets burned, or we get hit, then I can get out. But not until."

The rain continued, now a drone against the pavement, running down the faces of the mercury-vapor lamps, turning spilled gasoline into rainbows on the concrete.

The blue Mercury was back, this time with an Impala. The two cars jockeyed for position at the light, the Impala jerking as the driver rode the clutch. The driver revved it up, then raced the engine until it cut out, tickling the accelerator up to maintain his confidence. The light changed and both cars jackrabbited across the intersection. Clete watched them until they were out of sight.

The alarm bell rang. Clete pushed himself off the window sill, caught the green stamps that Paul tossed to him, then barged out the door.

"Dollar's worth of regular," he figured, looking at the beat-up Chevy.

"Dollar's worth of regular," the woman said from behind the wheel. "And check the oil and the tires. And the spare in the back."

Clete grimaced, then sloshed the gas into the tank, tripping the cutoff valve with his little finger just as the meter reached the $1.00 mark. He replaced the nozzle, then grabbed a paper towel for the dipstick, glaring as the woman banged out the contents of the car's ashtray, depositing a pile of ashes and filter butts onto the sopping pavement.

Paul was laughing when he came in.

"What's so funny?" Clete asked.

"Oh, the look on your face when she emptied her ashtray on the apron. How much did she want?"

"Dollar's worth. What else?"

"Figures. You meet the damnedest people in this business."

The rain kept up its wordless comment, a monotonous tattoo on the office roof. A police car—Silverglade's one and only—swished by the station. Clete reached into his pocket and took out a stick of gum, carefully wadding up the paper before putting the gum in his mouth.

"What'll you do if you go out of business?"

"Oh, maybe go back into electrical contracting." Paul reached into his pocket, produced a handkerchief, and blew his nose loudly. "Hell, I was doing line work in Germany during the war, got lots of experience, and I had a pretty good job here in town, too, but I wanted to start my own place. Needed a bigger challenge, I thought."

"You got one."

"Yeah, but not the kind I bargained for. I wanted to find a new way to run a business, not a new way to go bankrupt."

"Think you can hold out until summer?"

"Summer's not what I'm worried about. I already had my summer. Thing is, from now on is my slowest period, and I didn't do that good during the rush last year. Just about made two, three hundred dollars profit over costs, and that's eaten up already, and four months to go yet."

It was slow, even for a rainy Wednesday, although the rain had slacked off to a gentle misting.

"Clete, think you can close up by yourself tonight if I left, say, at ten?"

"Sure, no sweat," Clete replied. "If things get too hectic, I'll give you a call."

Paul glanced at his watch. It was 9:30.

The alarm bell rang—the blue Mercury again.

"I'll get it." Clete pushed off the sill and tucked his head in against the mist as he stepped outside.

The car was crammed full of the black-leather-jacket set, a flying box car oozing wisecracks.

"Fill 'er up, little man," said the leader behind the wheel. "And check the oil and the tires and the battery—the works."

"Yeah, and none of this 'quart low' jazz. Make sure you ram the stick all the way in." This came from a half-toothless grin and a long shock of red hair.

"Out," the leader commanded.

The four doors of the sedan flew open and the occupants emerged, some slouching, some stretching with exaggerated sensuality, some preferring the half-sleepy heavy-lidded expression of Cool. The mist had stopped now, so that the only reminder was a damp heaviness in the night air.

Clete snapped open the fender cover and reached in to unscrew the gas cap. "Regular or high test?" he asked mildly, depositing the cap on

top of the pump and reaching into his pocket for another stick of gum.

"High test, little man, and take your time. Check everything."

Clete nodded and deliberately unwrapped the gum, wadding the silver foil wrapper before flipping it into the trash can on the island. He unhooked the gas nozzle, nudged the switch with the filler pipe, and bent over the tank.

Paul looked up, glaring, as the six youths entered the office.

"What do you want?" The words sounded weak, somehow. The red-haired lieutenant leaned against the candy machine and lit a cigarette with a kitchen match, flicking it alight with a studied casualness that changed to surprise when the flame scorched his thumb. The leader snickered, a staccato sound from a narrow face, then dug into his pocket for a crumpled dollar bill.

"Change, Pop."

Paul surveyed the crew. They were silent now; the only sound was an ominous breathing.

Six to one.

"What do you need the change for?" Paul asked, aware how inane the question was, how much it betrayed his nervousness.

"Stow it, Pop, just give with the change. We don't want to cause any trouble." The remark from Red Hair brought a ripple of laughter from the group, stifled almost at once by a glare from the leader.

Paul glanced outside to where Clete had opened the hood and was carefully inserting the dipstick.

No help there, Paul muttered to himself. He sighed and reached into his pocket for the key, jammed it into the register and cranked it open. The reflection of a sudden movement in the glass of the windows was his only warning before the sand-filled sock hit the back of his head solidly.

Clete glanced into the office as his boss crumpled over the cash register. His eyes narrowed, measuring the odds—six to one. He replaced the dipstick and closed the hood. He would have to outthink them.

"The money—get the money," the leader ordered, lugging Paul behind the counter, stuffing him into the knee-space of the desk. Red Hair moved to the cash register, scooped out handfuls of bills and coins, jamming them into his pockets.

"Over in front of the window," he reminded the others who moved numbly, effectively blocking view from the outside. They waited, lounging, as Clete finished his work on the car and turned back toward the office; then they moved out, a tight group, intercepting Clete on his way in.

"How much?" the leader demanded of Clete.

"Five for gas, plus a buck-fifty for oil and a quart of antifreeze. Six fifty altogether." Clete was calm; his jaw moved slowly around his wad of gum. The leader peeled two bills from the roll in his pocket, then dug deeper for the change. Red

Hair got behind the wheel, the leader beside him, as the others piled in the rear of the car.

"Stamps?" Clete asked nonchalantly.

"Naw, keep 'em yourself," the leader snickered as the car spun out of the station.

Clete stood there a moment, the license-plate number fixing itself in his mind; then he turned and headed into the office.

Paul was gingerly disengaging himself from the knee-hole of the desk when Clete entered.

"You okay?" Clete asked.

"Yeah," Paul grunted. He slowly hauled himself up, then staggered to a chair and half collapsed onto it. "I'm gonna have a goose egg the size of a grapefruit tomorrow," he predicted. He ran his fingers along the back of his head, wincing as he touched the sore spot.

"That did it," he groaned. "First the business goes sour. Then the town punks steal my tools. Then the bad weather sets in. Now this." He looked up at Clete. "You recognize any of them?"

Clete shook his head. "All from out of town, I'd say."

Paul nodded, then grinned wryly. "I'd better check the cash register."

Clete glanced at his watch. "We ought to call the police first. They should be stopped in about five minutes, and I want them close to the center of town before they find out their car is blitzed."

Paul squinted at him. "Before they find out what and have time to repair it."

"That I blitzed their car."

"Man, you don't know enough about cars to blitz their wagon in the time it took them to hit this joint."

"No, maybe not in theory. But in practice, yes." Clete picked up the phone book.

Paul regarded his helper curiously, then shrugged and moved to the cash register, flipping the cover off the "Total" column and checking the figure on the invoice slip. "Hundred and fifty-two dollars and eighty cents," he recited.

"Minus six fifty for the stuff they bought here," Clete amended, "That comes to a hundred and forty-six dollars and thirty cents." Paul nodded as Clete shoved a dime into the pay phone and began to dial.

"Hundred and forty-six," Paul mused. "Minus twenty-two bucks profit, that leaves hundred and twenty-four."

Clete paused in his dialing. "So?"

"So I actually lose only a hundred and twenty-four bucks. At the rate I've been losing money already, this is the same as staying in business for three or four days."

"I repeat, so?"

Paul's eyes narrowed. "My franchise gets broken as a result of a night robbery—an *unsolved* night robbery."

Clete took his finger out of the dial. "You mean, an unsolved robbery is cheaper than a solved one?"

Paul buried his face in his hands. "I don't know, Clete. It's a hell of a lot cheaper for my business, that's for sure."

"There's something wrong about letting six punks get away with a hundred and forty-six bucks."

"Yeah, but one way I lose a hundred and twenty-four and the other way I lose maybe ten times that amount. Sure, there's something wrong about letting cheap punks get away with a robbery, but there's something wrong when a man is starving to death and going bankrupt to maintain a business he can't get out of. Hell, Clete, I'm not asking you to say the robbery never occurred—just shift the facts around a little."

"Like how?"

"Well, like it happened in the middle of the night—a break-in instead of a hold-up. Maybe they busted a side window to get in." Paul paused to think. "But you said you gimmicked their car?"

Clete nodded, replaced the phone on the hook, and scooped his dime from the return slot. "Yeah, I plugged the vent in the gas cap with some chewing gum. I figured the car'd go for maybe five, ten minutes before the vacuum kept the gas from coming into the carburetor." He glanced at his watch. "I figure about now."

Paul grinned. "You figured wrong. Most old cars, yeah, that would've done it. But that model Mercury's got an extra vent in the gas pipe, to keep gas from backing up and over the fender in the summertime when it expands from the heat. Sorry, Clete, but they're good for a lot of miles before their vacuum locks the gas line."

Clete smiled, a wry smile that was more grimace than grin. "Then it wouldn't make any difference when we called the cops, would it?"

Paul shook his head. "You know Nickie Nightstick. He couldn't detect his way out of a paper bag."

"So now what?" asked Clete. Paul did not answer, but walked over to the tool bench and picked up a towel. Clete watched him as he stepped outside, crossed over to a window in the lube bay, and smashed his hand through a pane of glass near the sash lock.

"That's the way they got in," Paul explained, returning to the office. "Since you closed up after I left, I couldn't take the day's receipts with me. You left it in a paper bag in the back room, and they found it and stole it. They knew where to look, obviously."

"Obviously."

Paul nodded, satisfied. "Guess I'll be going home, then. Call me up if it gets busy—right?"

"Right."

Paul opened a desk drawer and removed a card file. "Might as well work on some of my back bills," he said. "Y'know, Cletus, it's surprising how many dishonest people you find in a town like Silverglade. Kinda makes you wonder."

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

Few pleasures can compare, for the booklover, with that of discovering a posthumous *new* book by a favorite author; and in 1967, through the intercession of the patron saint of booklovers (and who, I wonder, should that be?), we are twice vouchsafed that delight. MURDERS THAT BAFFLED THE EXPERTS (Signet T3104, 75¢) contains 10 essays from *Liberty*, 1931-33, by America's greatest true crime writer, Edmund Pearson (1880-1937); 7 seem to be new in book form, and 3 deal with cases which Pearson never treated elsewhere. The standard of scholarship, wit and grace is predictably impeccable.

BUT THE DOCTOR DIED (Lancer 73-544, 60¢), by Craig Rice (1909-1958), purports to have been "recently discovered in manuscript form in a long-locked trunk." I can believe it; it sounds like authentic Rice—short of her best, and obviously in first draft, but still bright and foolish and wise and warming . . . and how wonderful it is to be back in Chicago again with the Justuses and the incomparable John J. Malone!

★★★★ **THE POWER HOUSE, *by William Haggard*** (Washburn, $3.95)

A national election hinges on an M.P.'s defection—and on gang warfare in London's gambling houses. Probably the best yet of the subtly spun intricacies concerning Colonel Russell of the Security Executive.

★★★★ **DEAD CORSE, *by Mary Kelly*** (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $3.95)

The British steel industry, Anglo-Saxon puritanism, the war of the generations, *Hamlet*, and Beethoven's Ninth are somehow all factors in this admirable novel by an always distinguished writer.

★★★ **THE EXECUTIONERS, *by John Creasey*** (Scribner's, $3.95)

Chief Superintendent West faces a band of fanatics resolved to restore capital punishment with their own hands. Effective melodrama on a strong social theme. And do not overlook Cresey's finest novel to date: GIDEON'S FIRE, by "J. J. Marric" (1961; Signet, 60¢).

★★★ **THE OPERATORS, *by Allan Prior*** (Simon & Schuster, $5.95)

The Big Caper novel expanded to twice its usual length by excellent novelistic penetration into its criminal characters; solid and meaty.

We have Ellery Queen with us twice: as editor in ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY: 1967 MID-YEAR EDITION (Davis, $1.25), 13th in these splendid semiannual bargains, with a short novel by John Dickson Carr and 18 other stories, from good to remarkable; and as author-detective in FACE TO FACE (New American Library, $4.95), which is in the noble EQ vein of elaborate deductive artifice, complete with Dying Message and startling logical solution.

★★★ **MURDER FOR ART'S SAKE, *by Richard Lockridge*** (Lippincott, $3.95)
Nice understanding of modern art and artists; good puzzle; sound detection by Lieutenant Shapiro and Dorian (Mrs. William) Weigand.

★★★ **THE NAMELESS ONES, *by Lesley Egan*** (Harper & Row, $4.50)
Today's senseless crimes of youthful violence preoccupy the Glendale P. D. in a good solid procedural novel.

★★★ **STRANGE CORNER, *by Mildred Davis*** (Crime Club, $3.95)
Odd sort of Hawaiian Gothic (in both its old and new senses)—persuasive and often chilling. And compare Miss Davis' notable first novel, THE ROOM UPSTAIRS (1948; Avon S239, 60¢).

★★★ **DEVIL AT YOUR ELBOW, *by D. M. Devine*** (Walker, $3.95)
Ingenious and well-clued novel of academic malice in a small university, by a British author who deserves to be better known here.

★★★ **UNTIL TEMPTATION DO US PART, *by Carter Brown*** (Signet D3122, 50¢)
One of the liveliest of Lieutenant Al Wheeler's cases—if you like your murders fast, brash, bouncy, wisecracking and sexy.

At first blush, Barbara Garson's MACBIRD (Grove BC-132, 75¢), which has occasioned as much controversy as the Warren Commission Report, may seem to have no place in these pages, but I feel that EQMM readers are more apt to understand and relish this remarkable work than the New York theater reviewers, who (to my mind) so completely missed the point. You have been exposed in EQMM (and in books, if you've followed this column's recommendations) to not a few examples of the Mystery of the Absurd, the New Humor, or whatever one wishes to call those outrageous, unpardonable, magnificent works of savage comedy which seem so characteristic of the late 1960's. All political considerations aside, MACBIRD is a major masterpiece of this New Humor; enjoy it as such.

Once again Manuel Andradas, the Photographer—the paid assassin of the Big Ones, the Corporation, the professional killer who preferred to think of himself as a "nullifier." Andradas had two loves—photography and money; and much as he loved his work (photography, you understand, not killing), he loved money more. Andradas was a man who always heard the rapping of opportunity, the knock on the door—and opportunity never had to knock twice for the Photographer . . .

THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE COLUMNIST

by JAMES HOLDING

MANUEL ANDRADAS LICKED HIS lips in anticipation—not of the killing itself (he took no pleasure in that) but of the money it would bring him.

"How much?" he asked Rodolfo.

Rodolfo sipped inky coffee from a small cup. With a touch of malice he made no attempt to hide, he said, "One million cruzeiros, Photographer." His long lips lifted.

Manuel stiffened. "It is an insult."

"Do not start that again," Rodolfo said, "about being underpaid and how reliable you are. This time the Big Ones have no paying client. There is no profit to us, you understand. It is all out-of-pocket expense."

"Oh. The Corporation itself wishes somebody nullified?"

"Exactly," Rodolfo said. "Hence the smaller fee."

"It should be larger, not smaller," Andradas argued sullenly. "After all, for someone who is a danger to the Big Ones themselves—"

"Enough." Rodolfo held up a hand. "One million is the price. Take it or leave it."

Manuel emptied his coffee cup. He lifted his muddy brown eyes to Rodolfo. And as he did so, it suddenly came to him with the shattering impact of absolute truth, never before suspected, that Rodolfo was holding out for himself a part of the money the Big Ones had authorized him to pay Manuel for this murder. One million—it was meager pay, even for the Corporation. A mere $450, North American!

Manuel reined his temper. He had but two gods, money and photography, and the greater of these was easily money. To bilk him of money, therefore, was the unforgivable offense. Could it be that Rodolfo had also taken a commission on Manuel's *past* services, too?

A searing rage churned in him at the thought. Rodolfo! That cowardly jackal who inhabited the very lowest kennel in the house of the Big Ones! And yet so arrogant and complacent in his role of lackey for the Corporation that he dared to withhold the honestly earned wages of a conscientious craftsman like the Photographer! It was intolerable.

Yet Manuel kept his anger hidden. One million, though admittedly meager, was still one million.

Looking into the Photographer's expressionless eyes, Rodolfo was reminded for an uneasy moment of a bushmaster he had once tried to stare down through the glass of a snake pen at Butantan Institute. To conceal a shiver of distaste, even of fear, he shrugged and repeated, "Take it or leave it, Photographer."

Manuel hooked his thumb under the strap of the camera case he carried over his shoulder and pretended to reflect. He said at length, "I take it."

Rofolfo laughed. "I knew you would."

"Who is it, then?"

The name and address, written by Rodolfo in a childish untidy scrawl on the edge of the cafe menu, were instantly committed to the Photographer's excellent memory.

Senhor Enrico Pallas
Corcovado Apartments

Rodolfo tore the menu into tiny fragments and put the fragments in his pocket.

As a rule, Manuel Andradas sedulously avoided detailed knowledge of the victims he was to assassinate (although he preferred the word "nullify"). But this was different. He said, "What has he done to the Big Ones?"

Rodolfo shook his head. "Just kill him, Photographer. What he has done is our business, not yours."

Manuel shrugged. "How soon?"

"As soon as possible. The matter is of great urgency."

Andradas nodded. "I will call you afterward."

"Do not call me tonight." Rodolfo showed rotten teeth in a lewd smile. "There is a beautiful new dancer in the chorus line of The Three Swords—" He broke off as their waiter approached, and Rodolfo paid for their *cafezinhos.*

When the waiter left, Manuel said with little interest, "A new dancer? She has been kind, I hope."

"More than kind." Rodolfo licked his lips.

"Then I will call you tomorrow if I finish the job by then."

"I am flying to Recife on Corporation business early tomorrow," Rodolfo said with an air of importance. "I will be back here Thursday morning. Call me then, eh?"

"All right."

"Don't put off the job till then, though. As I told you, it is urgent. The Big Ones are concerned."

"You can count on me," said Manuel. He stood up. "Half in advance, please."

When they shook hands outside the cafe, Rodolfo left a thick pad of crisp, inflation-born 10,000-cruzeiro notes in Manuel's hand. Then he walked away down the Rua do Ouvidor with the insolent gait of a monkey.

Manuel stared after him stolidly, though anger was still a turmoil within him.

Less than an hour later he had identified the apartment house in which his intended victim lived. It was shiningly new—a tall balconied finger of glass and tile that rose gracefully on stilts over its own parking area at street level. The name *Enrico Pallas* was on a card above a mailbox labeled 12-A in the elevator lobby. By telephoning several times from a public booth down the street, Manuel ascertained that Pallas was not at home—at least, nobody answered his telephone. So Manuel took the self-service elevator to the 12th floor.

There he discovered in less than a minute that the lock on the door to apartment 12-A yielded with pathetic ease to one of his skeleton keys, thus assuring him easy entrance when he should require it. After checking to make sure the door was not fitted with an inside bolt or chain, he relocked it quietly without entering the apartment.

He then inspected the corridor that bisected the 12th floor and separated the entrances to apartments 12-A and 12-B from those of 12-C and 12-D. The corridor smelled of frying meat. Someone was cooking an early dinner in 12-D. At the end of the corridor nearest 12-A, just beyond the tiny elevator lobby, he found a metal firedoor leading to a flight of steep firestairs.

Briefly he debated secreting himself behind the firedoor or inside Pallas' apartment and awaiting Pallas' return. Rodolfo had said the matter was urgent. But positive identification was more important than speed; one did not become the trusted nullifier of the Corporation in Rio by killing the wrong pigeons.

So Manuel returned to the street, bought an evening newspaper at a nearby kiosk, and retired to a bench across the avenue from the apartment to wait. Running an eye up the impressive facade of the building and marking the twelfth-floor windows, he wondered again what Enrico Pallas had done to arouse the lethal anger of the Big Ones.

In the fading light of late afternoon he leafed through his newspaper, reading nothing, but examining with a critical professional eye the photography exhibited in the half-tone illustrations. On page 7, the entertainment page, at the head of a night-life column called *Rio Ramblings*, an inch-square cut of a man's head attracted his attention. It was a photograph of a spectacularly ugly man with bald head, emaciated face, slightly crossed eyes, and no visible upper lip, although the lower lip, full and thick, came

up to clamp repulsively against the base of a fleshy nose.

Beside the cut, a byline leaped out at Manuel. *By Enrico Pallas.*

Manuel's hands twitched infinitesimally. The newspaper rattled slightly. So, he thought. A newspaper reporter, then. A columnist. A café-society scandalmonger. This is the man I am to nullify. With great interest he read Enrico Pallas' column, feeling suddenly a smug awareness of destiny's benign interest in his welfare. Only the last paragraph of *Rio Ramblings* was at all enlightening. It read:

> As noted in this space before, your reporter is convinced that a huge crime syndicate flourishes in Brazil today, dealing for profit in narcotics, prostitution, gambling, even in murder. Yours truly is determined to expose this succubus that feeds upon us all. Therefore, to anyone furnishing reliable information about this criminal organization—the so-called Big Ones, or Corporation—or supplying a verifiable lead to the identity of any active member in it, your reporter is authorized by this newspaper to pay a substantial reward and also to guarantee the anonymity of the informer.

Manuel chuckled. Small wonder the Big Ones had seen fit to call for the immediate services of the Photographer! This Senhor Pallas was sniffing hungrily at their heels, it seemed; attempting to suborn their staff; threatening to expose the individuals who made up the organization.

He folded the newspaper and dropped it on the bench beside him. His momentary amusement at the ambitious plans of Enrico Pallas gave way once more to a brooding contemplation of Rodolfo's perfidy. For a long time he sat motionless on the bench, watching the building entrance but thinking of Rodolfo.

It was after eight o'clock and almost dark when a foreign sports car of ancient vintage turned into the parking area under the apartment house with a squeal of worn rubber. Manuel saw a man get out and walk toward the elevator well. There was no mistaking the shockingly ugly face revealed by the elevator light. It was Enrico Pallas. Two minutes later a light came on in the front windows of 12-A on the 12th floor. Enrico Pallas was now at home. But for how long, Manuel asked himself. Did not night-club columnists spend their nights in night clubs? Assuredly.

He hastened at once, therefore, to the telephone booth he had used before and made two calls.

The first was to the supper club known as The Three Swords.

A deliberately provocative female voice answered his call. "The Three Swords," it said. "You wish a reservation?"

"I do not," Manuel answered. "Can you tell me the name of your new dancer in the chorus line?"

"I am sorry we are not permitted

to give out the addresses or telephone numbers of our artistes."

"I don't want her address or telephone number," Manuel growled. Then he tried to sound romantic. "I merely want to know her name so that I can send her some flowers backstage as a token of my admiration."

"Why didn't you say so?" The girl on the phone laughed. "Her name's Maria Campos. It's listed on the program."

"How was I to know which name was hers?" Manuel said. And he hung up.

Then he called Enrico Pallas' apartment. Almost at once a man's voice answered the telephone. "Hello. Enrico Pallas here," it said. The words had a certain liquid blurring, no doubt caused by the man's deformed mouth. "Who is this?"

"I prefer not to give my name," Manuel spoke solemnly. "I am calling about your offer of a reward in today's *Rio Ramblings*."

"Yes? What about it?"

The Photographer went to the heart of the matter at once. "I can supply you with the verifiable lead you are so anxious for, Senhor Pallas."

There was a moment of silence during which Manuel could hear the man's breathing quicken over the wire. When Pallas spoke, however, it was with an attempt at calm. "You interest me greatly, Senhor," he said cautiously. "What information do you have?"

"It is quite valuable, I believe. How much is the reward?"

"For what, specifically?"

"For putting you on the track of an active member of the Big Ones."

"Ah!" Pallas' voice reflected excitement despite his efforts to maintain a businesslike tone. "A million cruzeiros for that. But it must be genuine. It must produce results, you see?"

"It will. You have my word for that. And my niece's, too."

"Your niece's?"

"Yes. She is a dancer. And she has recently been led, poor innocent, into a liaison with an admirer who frequents the club where she dances. Last night, to her horror, she discovered quite by accident that this man is a member of the Corporation." Manuel brought this out baldly.

Pallas said after a pause, "Your niece's lover is a member of the Corporation? Is that what you are trying to tell me?"

"Yes. Exactly. And the reward?"

"Forget the reward for a moment. Who is your niece's lover?"

"I don't know." Manuel permitted a thread of regret to color his tone.

"You don't know! Then why in God's name are you calling me?"

"I speak for my niece, Senhor. Please listen to me. Naturally, she is terrified, knowing all at once that her friend is one of the Big Ones—a criminal, an evil man, perhaps a murderer. She reads your column, you see." Manuel threw this in sly-

ly, uncertain whether Pallas was susceptible to flattery.

"Half a million people read my column," Pallas snapped. "What has that to do with it?"

"Only that my niece believes herself to be in a very dangerous position now, do you see? She came to me this morning, weeping, seeking comfort and advice. Her parents are dead, you understand. She would tell me nothing about this man, not even his name—except that he is definitely one of the Corporation. I didn't, of course, know how to advise her, poor child—that is, until I saw your column this afternoon in the newspaper."

Pallas laughed. "You thought you would muscle in on a nice fat reward, is that it?"

"I merely thought," said the Photographer with dignity, "that your reward might furnish my niece with the funds she would need to withdraw safely from her liaison with this—this criminal."

"What does she need funds for?"

"The plane fare to Buenos Aires," said Manuel simply. "Or to Montevideo, where she can get work dancing. She would have to leave Rio at once—you understand that, don't you?"

"I suppose so." Pallas paused. "Are you offering to advise your niece to confide in me, then? To tell me her lover's name for the reward? Is that your suggestion?"

"You are very astute. Yes. Just that. But if you could tell her the reward is of half a million only—" Manuel spoke anxiously—" she will still think it a fortune."

"And *you* would collect the other half million, is that it?"

"Why not? I am arranging matters, am I not? I will guarantee, Senhor Pallas, that my niece will meet you tomorrow night wherever you say—she sleeps in the daytime, you understand—and tell you the name of her lover and what he looks like. Thus, you will be able to identify him absolutely and have him followed secretly until he leads you to other members of the Corporation—if that is how you want to handle it."

"Never mind how I want to handle it," Pallas said. "All I want is the man's name and description from your niece." For a moment Manuel thought that any suspicions Pallas may have entertained about the veracity of the story had been laid to rest by Manuel's obvious greed for half the reward. Then Pallas added thoughtfully, "That is, if you *have* a niece. And this is not just a confidence trick."

"I assure you I have a niece. And it is not a confidence trick. I have promised to send my niece to see you tomorrow night, have I not? And if she fails to convince you, you need not give her one-half of the reward. Is that not true?"

"I suppose it is."

"Well, then. You must have the reward ready to give her at once *if* her information satisfies you," Man-

uel said. "Tomorrow night. Because she will have to fly from Rio instantly to escape the vengeance of the Big Ones, eh?"

Caustically Pallas said, "And when must I have *your* half of the reward ready?"

"At the same time. Tomorrow night. I will meet you as soon as my niece leaves you."

Impatiently Pallas said. "I must have some facts, some verifiable facts, before I can make any deal with you."

"What facts? I will not reveal my name. I told you that."

"You said your niece is a dancer in a night club. Right? Tell me the name of the night club."

"The Three Swords," Manuel replied promptly.

"The Three Swords," said Pallas more amiably, "is a part of my nightly beat. All right. So far, so good. And what is your *niece's* name? That is another fact I must have."

"Since she is my sister's daughter," said Manuel, "her name is not mine. I can therefore tell it to you. It is Maria Campos. Have you heard of her, perhaps?"

Pallas whistled. "Yes, I have. She is quite beautiful. I have seen The Three Swords' floor show a dozen times."

Manuel said, "Maria is not without beauty, true. But alas, all it has gotten her is a lover who is a criminal."

"How did your niece find out that her boy friend is a Big One? You told me that it was by accident."

"So she said. But she did not tell me how."

After an appreciable hesitation Pallas said, "All right, whoever you are. Tomorrow night."

Manuel drew a slow breath. Pallas was hooked. "Where?" asked Manuel.

"At my apartment?"

"That might be best. Any more public place would be dangerous for her. She must avoid any possibility of being seen with you. You can understand that."

"What time can you have her here, then? It is 12-A, Corcovado Apartments, by the way."

"Would midnight be convenient? She can leave the supper club between her early and late shows and not be missed for several hours—except by her lover, perhaps, should he happen to be at the club tomorrow night."

"I'll be waiting for her at midnight. You are sure you can persuade her to come?" The way he said "persuade" showed he would have preferred to say "force."

"Not a doubt of it. She is desperate for a way to rid herself of this man. She will be there, never fear."

"All right. Anything more?"

"Nothing," said Manuel, "except please remember to have the money in cash—all of it. I shall give you and my niece an hour in which to express your gratitude to each other for mutual favors—" he deliberately put innuendo into the words—"be-

fore I arrive to collect my share. *Va bem?*"

"*Va bem*," said Pallas.

When Manuel heard the humming of the dead line in his ear, he slowly replaced his own receiver. Then unconsciously he flexed his fingers, like a pianist who wishes to ease his joints before tackling a difficult composition.

The next evening, knowing that Rodolfo was safely in Recife, Manuel himself attended the early show at The Three Swords. Grudgingly he admitted that Rodolfo and Senhor Pallas had been right. Maria Campos *was* beautiful.

When the chorus finished its last number, he sent a note backstage to her. Written in an untidy childish scrawl amazingly like the handwriting with which Rodolfo decorated the edges of menus while giving Manuel his assignments, it read:

> Darling—Just stopped in on my way from the airport to leave you this note because I can't stay. I am home earlier than I expected and have business to finish, but I will see you later on tonight I hope. Flew back from Recife this evening with a newspaperman I know—an influential fellow who writes a column called *Rio Ramblings*. Do you know it? I raved to him about your talent and beauty until he begged me to bring you to a party he is giving tonight at his apartment. If he gives you a complimentary mention in his column, it could aid your career enormously, couldn't it? So meet me at his place at midnight, will you? His name is Enrico Pallas, 12-A, Corcovado Apartments. I am sure I will be able to make it by midnight. See you then, Maria.
>
> Rodolfo

When the waiter nodded to him that the note had been delivered into the hands of Maria Campos, and that she had questioned neither its source nor its penmanship, Manuel glanced at his wrist watch. It was twenty minutes to twelve. Unhurriedly he paid his bill, took up his camera case, and left The Three Swords. There was ample time for him to reach the Corcovado Apartments before Maria Campos; ample time to conceal himself behind the firedoor on the 12th floor and check over his camera before the columnist and the dancer confronted each other at midnight.

On Thursday morning Manuel met Rodolfo by appointment in a small café overlooking Ipanema Beach. Although it was only noon the beach was already crowded.

Rodolfo ordered *cafezinho* and said, "Well?"

"It is done," Manuel answered. "Senor Pallas met with a regrettable accident last night."

"So I heard on the radio. He fell twelve stories from his balcony into the street, did he not?" Rodolfo grinned and clicked his tongue. "Too much to drink perhaps."

"He was quite sober when I visited him shortly after midnight," Manuel said. "See for yourself." He passed a small print to Rodolfo.

Shielding it with his hands, Rodolfo inspected it. It showed Senhor Pallas sitting in one of his own leather armchairs, his eyes closed, his incredible mouth hanging open. He might have been asleep, save for the unnatural angle at which his bald head lolled loosely on his neck.

"What an ugly brute!" murmured Rodolfo who was no beauty himself. "We are well rid of him. Did you have any trouble?"

"None at all. Except that I had to wait behind a firedoor in his corridor for almost an hour."

"Why was that?"

Something changed in Manuel's eyes. "A woman was with him until after midnght."

Rodolfo grinned. "A last fling before the end. Lucky man."

"Lucky, all right. She was beautiful, truly beautiful."

Rodolfo showed interest.

"Yes. A crazy one, though," remarked Manuel.

"Crazy? Why crazy?"

"I listened at Pallas' door several times during her visit."

"You peeping Tom!"

"No, I could not see, but I could hear a little. She was boasting to Pallas that one of her lovers was a member of the Corporation."

Rodolfo sat erect in his chair. "What! Why should she boast of such a thing? Even if it were true?"

"It was hard to hear through the door. I am quite sure, however, that Pallas was offering her money to reveal this other lover's name. At least that was the impression I got."

Although his coffee cup clattered a little when he set it back in its saucer, spilling a few drops, Rodolfo asked calmly enough, "And did she tell Pallas this other lover's name?"

Manuel Andradas spread his hands in a gesture of ignorance. "Somebody came up in the elevator just then, and I had to skip back to my firedoor," he said. "Do you think it likely she told him?"

"I do not," said Rodolfo almost too positively. "And I'll tell you why. First, she couldn't possibly know for sure that any man, even a lover, was a member of the Corporation. All members are sworn to silence in the matter on pain of death, as you know. And second, even if she had such information, she'd be a fool to sell it. The Big Ones repay such carelessness with certain death. As she must realize if she has any intelligence at all."

"Perhaps," said Manuel trying to be helpful, "she was just an innocent. Teasing Pallas a little. Trying to make him jealous with her talk of a lover among the Big Ones."

Rodolfo was contemptuous. "One does not usually tease a prominent newspaper columnist in just that way. Nor does a newspaper reporter usually offer money to be teased."

"Is that what Pallas was? A newspaper reporter?" Manuel feigned

surprise. "Well, no matter. He has been nullified now. And whether the dancer told him the name of her lover really makes no difference, eh? Will you show your superiors my photograph and bring me the rest of my money?"

"As usual," said Rodolfo absently. He was lost in thought. Finally he said, "Did you overhear the dancer's name by any chance?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Of course I am sure. Why are you so concerned about her, Rodolfo? Pallas is dead."

"The woman is not, I might point out. If she sold information once, or even considered doing it, she could do so again. Always providing she *has* information. I would like to be sure of her identity, that is all. This could be vital to the security of the Big Ones. Don't you see that?" The Photographer detected a growing uneasiness in Rodolfo's voice.

"But you just said you thought it extremely unlikely she sold Pallas any information."

"True. But I need to be certain." Rodolfo ordered another *cafezinho* for each of them. "You said you saw the woman?"

"I told you—unbelievably beautiful."

Rodolfo said, "Did she look at all familiar? Had you ever seen her before?"

"She was a perfect stranger to me. I wish I *did* know her. She would make a magnificent model. Such a slender waist, stately carriage, entrancing face. Oh, she was a real knockout, Rodolfo. Here, look at her." With an air of the greatest candor Manuel brought out of his inside jacket pocket a snapshot. "I took this picture of her as she was leaving Pallas' apartment last night. Maybe *you* know who she is, Rodolfo." He handed the photograph across the table.

While Rodolfo examined the picture, his head bent, Manuel recalled with quiet pleasure the small comedy he had witnessed the previous night just before he snapped that picture through the half-open firedoor.

Dressed in a floor-length white evening gown that enhanced her beauty, Maria Campos had knocked on Pallas' door at midnight exactly. And when Pallas had eagerly thrown the door wide, she had asked in a timid voice, "Senhor Pallas?" although anyone familiar with his picture in *Rio Ramblings* could not possibly have mistaken him.

"Your servant," Pallas had replied with a bow. "Come in, Maria."

Maria said, "You are so sweet to invite me to come to your party, Senhor." She entered the apartment, then noticing the lack of party noises, she hung back. "It *is* a party? Rodolfo said—"

"Rodolfo?" Pallas raised his eyebrows, puzzled.

"Yes, Rodolfo. His note said you were giving a party and to meet him here."

"Oh." Pallas beamed, a horrible grimace with him. "Your uncle. Is that Rodolfo?"

Maria drew herself up. "You are pleased to joke, Senhor." There was ice in her voice. "Where *is* Rodolfo, if you please?"

"I do not know any Rodolfo, honey. Unless he is the man whose name you are going to sell me for half a million cruzeiros." Manuel, behind his firedoor, grinned at how scrupulously Pallas was keeping their bargain.

Maria's mobile features had first expressed bewilderment, then dismay. She was thoroughly at sea. She stared at Pallas, then checked the number on the apartment door behind him. As for Pallas, he continued to smile at her, urging her to enter. And Maria smiled back—a smile of embarrassment for this repulsive stranger, of apology, censure, and anger, all mixed up together. Yet a smile nevertheless. And Manuel's camera had caught the scene neatly at the very moment when Maria Campos was saying "I'm afraid there has been some mistake, Senhor."

Then she had turned on her rhinestone heel and gone back to the waiting elevator. There they were in the snapshot—the columnist and the dancer, he in the doorway, she in the corridor; both smiling like friends (or lovers?); both faces in perfect focus; even the number on the door was clearly visible.

Rodolfo raised his eyes from the print in his hand. He said, clearing his throat, "She *is* beautiful, isn't she?" He drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "It would be a sinful waste to kill her needlessly, would it not? I think you were mistaken, Photographer, in what you thought you heard through the door."

Manuel shrugged indifferently. "Perhaps," he conceded. He was savoring Rodolfo's torment with a blank face but a joyous heart. The snapshot, incontrovertible evidence that Maria Campos had visited Enrico Pallas for *some* purpose last night, had shaken Rodolfo badly. His arms trembled. He worried his lips with his teeth. Undoubtedly, Manuel surmised, Rodolfo was groping desperately in his memory for any chance word of his, any careless action, that could have hinted to Maria Campos that he was one of the Big Ones. Manuel had never seen Rodolfo so obviously agitated.

It was time for the *coup de grâce.*

Obligingly Rodolfo fed him the cue. "She *must* be an innocent," he muttered once more. "For how could she possibly know that her boy friend is a member of the Corporation?"

Manuel suddenly struck himself lightly on the forehead. "I am a dolt!" he exclaimed. "Of course. That is what she meant by her parting words to Pallas last night!"

"What did she say?" Rodolfo had trouble with the simple phrase.

Manuel replied with the air of a tolerant man-of-the-world, "She made some laughing reference to

lovers who talk in their sleep . . ."

Rodolfo sagged, all the starch gone out of him. A faint greenish pallor crept under the tan of his cheeks. Distraught, he thrust Manuel's photographs into a pocket. He lifted his eyes to Manuel as though it was a physical effort to raise them. They contained both apology for guilt and mute acknowledgement of it. He spoke in a strained whisper. "We—we must kill her after all then."

"We?"

"You. Please. She is your next assignment."

"Good," said Manuel. "I can use the money." He played the farce out to the end. "But we don't know who she is, do we?"

"She is Maria Campos, a girl in the chorus line at The Three Swords," Rodolfo said in a dead voice.

"You know her after all?"

"I know her."

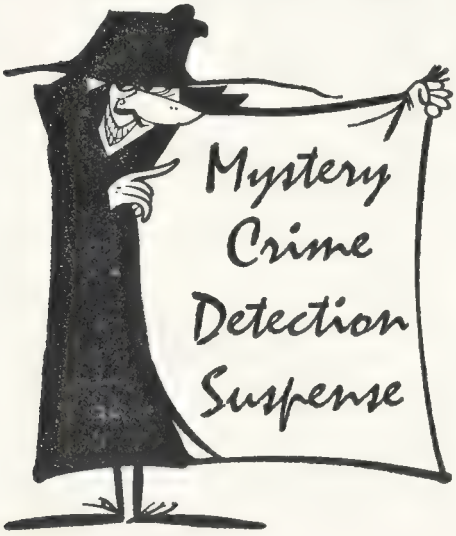
"How curious," said Manuel. He paused. "Then *you* must be the lover she meant, eh?"

Rodolfo said nothing, so the Photographer went on sympathetically, "Then we certainly must nullify her quickly. She is a threat to us all, Rodolfo."

Placidly then he sat back in his chair and waited for Rodolfo's inevitable question—the question he himself was usually forced to ask.

It came at last. "How much?" asked Rodolfo.

The Photographer smiled. "Two million should cover it," he said, "if you want a quick, quiet, reliable job."



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It was exactly the sort of case that "happened" to Sir Blane Jopphy, Commissioner of Metropolitan Police, whenever he left his office in New Scotland Yard . . .

LAMENT FOR A SCHOLAR

by NEIL MacNEISH

NORMALLY NOTHING HAPPENS AT St. Merridue College—that is, nothing out of the ordinary. Young men arrive, become educated in their fashion, and leave to make place for a new lot of ignoramuses. Professors argue small points with each other in the common room after dinner, and gossip, when they have the opportunity, with remarkable pettiness about those colleagues who do not happen to be present at the time.

On one such evening they were doing just that—even with a distinguished visitor, Sir Blane Jopphy, in their midst. Sir Blane had simply stopped off to spend the night when his car had broken down, so he really didn't count. The fact that he was Commissioner of Metropolitan Police didn't count either, for what have Shakespeare and Homer to do with the Metropolitan Police?

"You know Deedcase," Sceptus was saying. Sceptus was lean and wiry, and had a low opinion of his colleagues. "Our distinguished fellow scholar, that is, who is not here tonight. Where is he, by the way?"

"Gone to town—to the cinema, I believe," put in Rasley scornfully. Rasley, even with one arm in a sling, conveyed an impression of boundless, but acrid, energy.

"Just what you'd expect," said Sceptus. "As I was saying, I think he's getting—I do hate to say it—a bit shallow. I found him reading Suetonius in *English*." A shocked silence, followed by a low murmur, greeted this revelation.

"Surely not," Farlee Prout-Rossiter, whose field was Comparative Literature, protested. He was younger, plumper, and milder than the others, apparently deficient in that aspect of personality which leads one to take pleasure in the foibles and failings of others. Perhaps, thought Jopphy, adiposity is the differentiating factor—or perhaps it's youth.

Hadenet, the white-haired and fragile Dean of the college, spoke to Jopphy. "I'm afraid all this is over your head." he said kindly. "Still, Deedcase has been annoying us considerably of late by his ill-considered tastes. It isn't seemly for a professor to behave thus, and we are no end disturbed."

At that precise moment the harmonious little scene was shattered by the unprecedented bursting in—there is no other expression for it—the bursting in of a student.

"Nudsett, what is the meaning of this?" asked the Dean sharply.

"Sir," replied the unhappy youth, "it really is important. We've found the body of Deedcase at the archery range—with an arrow through it. Through the body, I mean. It's—I mean he's dead, sir," he added.

"Now, now," said the Dean, employing a surprisingly mild tone to this boy who had entered the sacred precincts of the common room. "No need to be redundant, you know. When you say you found a body, that presupposes it to be a dead one."

"Sorry, sir." The youth looked properly abashed.

"Well, well," the Dean turned his attention from the student. "I don't know that I am versed in procedures for dealing with bodies that are dead." He waited for a response to this sally, then went on. "I do believe, though, that we are fortunate to have with us—what a singularly fortuitous coincidence, my dear sir—a—um—a bobby, if that is the correct nomenclature. Can you help us, Sir Blane?"

Jopphy was unruffled by this appalling ignorance of the difference between a bobby and a Commissioner of police. He merely said that he would be delighted to instruct the gentlemen in proper procedure, the first step of which was to call in the local police.

"But surely," the Dean protested gently, "you yourself have a greater—hem—eminence than they. If we already have a Commissioner on the scene, what need we with them?"

"So," thought Jopphy, "the old boy isn't quite so naive in worldly matters as he tries to appear. That might be useful to know. Decidedly useful."

Aloud he explained about jurisdictions, protocol, and similar baffling matters, and then he himself called the local police without further delay.

The local Inspector, Collier Pactson, on learning to whom he was speaking, of course invited Sir Blane, with the utmost deference, to participate *ex officio* in the investigation.

Sir Blane then sent Nudsett back to stay with the body, and continued, while awaiting the arrival of Inspector Pactson, to elicit more information about the dead man.

For a large point had yet to be elucidated—and that, of course, was whether it was accident or murder.

Sceptus was as acid in his appraisal of Deedcase as before. Was he so innocent of the suspicious light in which he was thus placing himself, or was he pursuing some deep game of his own? The answer to that, Sir Blane decided, would come later.

"Deedcase," Sceptus was saying,

"aroused much dislike. He was not a proper scholar, nor was he a nice man. He provokes—no, I should now utilize the past tense, should I not?—he provoked Rasley mercilessly. He threatened to expose his treatise on the weapons of the Bible as a thoroughly trumpery work. Of course, my dear fellow," he turned to Rasley, "I'm not so sure it isn't. But that's neither here nor there."

So that was it. Sceptus had, unfortunately for him, conveyed his own antagonism toward Deedcase too early and too firmly to undo—before, in fact, the death had been discovered. Now he was losing no time in supplying the others with motives as cogent as his own. Did not this also indicate, in some measure, innocence? For, if Sceptus were guilty, he would not have spoken against Deedcase even before the discovery; he would have known even then that Deedcase was murdered.

Rasley protested with vigor. "That was just the usual innocent merriment that adds spice to scholarship, so to speak." He waved his injured arm, winced, and continued to gesture with the other one. "We were the best of friends, really. That, indeed, is why we indulged in our little byplay of criticisms. Friendly bickering, that was all there was to it."

A noise came from the Dean that would, in a less utterly dignified person, be called a snort. Jopphy turned to him. "Do you, perhaps, have a different interpretation of their relationship, sir?"

"No, indeed, not at all," objected the Dean. "Surely Rasley knows best how he felt about his late colleague. All in the spirit of fun, if he says so."

For the second time that evening the peace of the common room was disturbed. The local Inspector was a brisk, bustling, no-nonsense man, who ruffled the atmosphere considerably. However, he was somewhat ill at ease in this academic milieu, which threw his briskness a little out of focus.

"I'm very glad you're here, sir," he confided to Jopphy. "You are an educated man yourself, if I may say so, and you may understand these blokes. I don't know what they're talking about, and besides, a man has been killed—one of their own. Wouldn't you think they'd care? All they talk about are conditional concessive clauses and iambic pentameters and I don't know what."

"Dust, my dear Pactson—they're just throwing dust in our eyes with their twaddle. They think one of themselves killed Deedcase, and they're badly frightened. Decidedly that."

Pactson was cheered by this outlook. "Ah. That makes a difference, doesn't it? Now we know where we are. Let's have a look at the scene of the crime."

The Dean wanted to show them the way, but he was really too frail and palsied for a crosscountry walk

at night. It fell to Sceptus to guide the police to the archery range.

"We installed it just two weeks ago," he explained as they went. "Some of us are quite good at it. I myself," he said, trying to sound modest, "am no mean hand with a longbow. Rasley too is quite an enthusiast, and avers that he is expert as well. But he hasn't demonstrated this as yet. No. He broke his arm helping to install the equipment. Most fortuitous, don't you think?"

"Are you suggesting," asked Jopphy, "that he broke his arm deliberately, so as not to have to make good his claim to being a skilled archer? Or, alternatively, do you think he is pretending about the arm to avoid possible loss of face? Or even, pretending about the arm to prepare a defense against a charge of murder by longbow?"

"You may not believe it,' said Sceptus aggressively, "but I would not think Rasley incapable of such a deception. However, no. The arm is broken. I asked his doctor." He uttered an embarrassed titter. "You must think I don't have a high opinion of anyone. I like Prout-Rossiter, though. In fact, I like Prout-Rossiter so much I spent the whole day with him."

Here it comes, thought Jopphy—the first alibi. He had wondered when these learned but unworldly gentlemen would get around to that. The whole day, though. Wasn't that overdoing it? Or did it reveal rather that Sceptus did not know when the crime had taken place and was taking no chances? Or was that what Jopphy was *meant* to think? To be, or not to be, that is the question. Now why, he mused, should this have come into his head?

They walked on in the dark. Jopphy tripped over a piece of wood, halted, then inspected the archery range, now lit by the torches of the police. He was standing on a small hillock, by a shed which would no doubt prove to contain bows and arrows. The shed, he noted, was unlocked. Across the meadow, at what seemed to be a stiff version of regulation distance, were three targets.

They went over to those. Four targets, if one included the body of a man with an arrow in his chest.

"Not a doubt of it, sir." The Inspector was brisk and bustling again as they sat in the common room, now cleared of professors and established as police headquarters for the investigation. Pactson had taken over, making the common room his own, vanquishing academe and installing brisk police practicality. "There was poison on that arrow. We can rule out accident once and for all. But you did that long ago, didn't you?"

"It had the smell of murder," Sir Blane agreed. "I can't be more definite than that. They weren't acting naturally, or what passes with them for natural. They thought it was murder. And one of them knew."

"And the others suspected it. I can follow you, and them, that far. Now then"—his efficiency was certainly coming through—"there are some we can rule out. The professors who weren't here at all tonight, for a start. They had engagements elsewhere, with reputable people to vouch for them that they really were where they said they were.

"Then there's the Dean. He could never draw one of those longbows. He's too weak and shaky by far for a feat of that strength, or for accurate aim. And Rasley couldn't have done it with his broken arm.

"Then there's Sceptus. I like him. What I mean is, I don't like him, but I like him as our man. He admitted he's a good shot with a longbow—had to, knew we'd find out—and he certainly didn't like Deedcase. His alibi could be a phony—we're checking it now. Of course, if it is, we'll have to consider Prout-Rossiter too, but he's less likely. Not even this bunch of birds has said anything against him, and he doesn't seem to be in on the general dislike of Deedcase. Besides, they all say he can't handle a bow and arrow. But that's not such a telling point—he could be pretending, of course. What's your opinion, sir?"

"The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," said Jopphy.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Pactson was puzzled. "If you'll excuse my saying so, you sound like one of them. I know you're an educated man, but you're a policeman too."

"Sorry." Jopphy hadn't meant to speak the quotation aloud, but now he felt he had to explain. "It's just something I've been thinking of. I don't really know why. It doesn't get us much further. We know there are arrows in the case. There's a sling too, but as you so appositely point out, a man with his arm in a sling—legitimately—cannot draw a bowstring. I agree that we must find out more about Sceptus' alibi. Decidedly we must."

But why did he keep coming back to Hamlet's soliloquy?

> To be, or not to be: that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them? To die; to sleep . . .

Well, someone had certainly died. And someone had taken arms, for a bow and arrow could be called that. And Deedcase's troubles, whatever they might have been, had ended. He did seem to have trouble in maintaining harmonious relations with his colleagues. But could that be called a sea of troubles? It might not have troubled Deedcase at all. He might, indeed, have enjoyed it.

Sir Blane tried another tack. The murderer, presumably, had end-

ed some of his own troubles by his act. For one does not kill unless one is troubled, and expects to find relief, or at least improvement in an intolerable situation. But could the murderer's troubles be said to be ended? Surely some further trouble would be involved in avoiding detection.

At that moment Nobcastle, a member of the local constabulary, entered with the discouraging news that Sceptus' alibi was valid. So, of course, interrelatedly, was Prout-Rossiter's. Not perhaps for the whole day. But that was not necessary—the claim had been, in fact, an extravagance. Deedcase had been killed between 6:00 and 7:00 p.m.—they knew that now—and Sceptus and Prout-Rossiter had been in the latter's quarters during that period. They had been waited on by Prout-Rossiter's servant, who seemed quite reliable; also, various members of the student body had been in and out, some by invitation and some unexpectedly.

Decidedly the alibi was valid. It was too large, too numerous, one might say, to be anything but that.

"Which brings us back to Rasley and the Dean," said Pactson without much hope. "Do you think it could be someone we haven't yet considered? In this crazy place I could even believe a student might murder because of a grudge."

"Perhaps." But Jopphy's reply was absent-minded and without conviction. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It kept coming back to that.

And now he saw how. "Pactson, Rasley is our man."

"Indeed, sir?" The Inspector was doubtful. "How do you figure that?"

"It hinges, as I thought, on slings and arrows. Or, to be more exact, on a man with his arm in a sling, and on sling*shots*. That was what we overlooked. Arrows can be shot from slings, not exclusively from bows, as we had been taking for granted. By a skilled shooter of arrows, that is. A man who studies Biblical weapons and likes archery. The probability is high that he has experimented with slingshots.

"Perhaps, as Sceptus so uncharitably suggested, he did break his arm on purpose—to divert suspicion from himself. He planted his slingshot in the ground on that hillock we stood on and needed only one arm to draw the arrow back. I believe I actually tripped on the slingshot. Certainly there was a piece of wood lying about, on which I stumbled. He was careless to leave it there, but perhaps he was feeling overly secure because his broken arm would free him from suspicion, and so he didn't take sufficient pains over the other points. With poison on the arrow he didn't need the power of a longbow—just enough to break the victim's skin.

"And there was always his name, Pactson. His name pointed to him at once."

EDITORS' NOTE: Once again we have the homicidal handiwork of our Mistress of Anagrams, Mrs. Norma Schier.

As Sir Blane Jopphy remarked, the murderer's name was a dead giveaway—for "Rasley" anagrams to "slayer"; and as in previous "disguised detectives" all the other proper names are anagrammatic clues:

St. Merridue = murder site
Deedcase = deceased
Hadenet = the Dean
Sceptus = suspect
Farlee Prout-Rossiter = Literature Professor
(a beautiful anagram!)
Nudsett = student
Collier Pactson = local Inspector
Nobcastle = constable

The detective was no doubt easily recognizable:

Sir Blane Jopphy = Sir John Appleby

and the supposed author's name carried on Mrs. Schier's private and personal 'tec tradition:

Neil MacNeish = Michael Innes
(a good enough anagram for Michael Innes himself to use!)

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First-class entertainment!

DEAD MAN'S SHOES

by MICHAEL INNES

CATCHING THE 8:05 TRAIN HAD meant an early start for Derry Fisher. A young man adept at combining pleasure with business, he had fallen in with some jolly people in the seaside town to which his occasions had briefly taken him, and on his last night he had danced into the small hours.

As a result of this he was almost asleep now—and consequently at a slight disadvantage when the panting and wide-eyed girl tumbled into his compartment. This was a pity. It was something that had never happened to him before.

"Please . . . I'm so sorry . . . I only —" The girl, who seemed of about Derry's own age, was very pretty and very frightened. "A man—" Again speech failed her, and she swayed hazardously on her feet. "You see, I was alone, and—"

But by this time Derry had collected himself and stood up. "I'm afraid you've been upset," he said. "Sit down and take it easy. Nothing more can happen now."

The girl sat down—but not without a glance around the empty compartment. Derry guessed that she badly felt the need of some person of her own sex. "Thank you," she said.

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This time she had tried to smile as she spoke. But her eyes remained scared. It suddenly occurred to Derry that part of the nastiness of what had presumably happened must be in its anonymous quality.

"My name is Derry Fisher," he said. "I work for an estate agent in London, and I've been down to Sheercliff on a job. I caught this train so as to be back in the office after lunch."

Whether or not the girl took in this prosaic information Derry was unable to tell. Certainly she did not, as he had hoped, do anything to supply her own biography. Instead, she produced a handkerchief and blew her nose. Then she asked a question in a voice still barely under control. "I suppose I must look an utter fool?"

Derry resisted the temptation to say that, on the contrary, she looked quite beautiful. It mightn't, in the circumstances, be in terribly good taste. So he contented himself with shaking his head.

"Not a bit," he said. "And I wish I could help in any way. Did you have any luggage in the compartment you had to leave? If you did, may I fetch it for you?"

"Thank you very much." The girl appeared steadied by this unexciting proposal. "I have a green suitcase, and the compartment is the last one in this coach. But first I should tell you about the man."

Derry doubted it. He knew that, unless the man had been so tiresome that he ought to be arrested, it would be wise that no more should be said. The girl could tell her mother or her best friend later in the day. She would only regret blurting things to a strange man.

"Look here," he said, "I wouldn't bother about the chap any more —not unless you feel it's only fair to other people to bring in the police at Waterloo. In that case I'll see the guard. But at the moment I'll fetch the suitcase. And you can think it over."

"I don't think you understand."

Derry paused, his hand already on the door to the corridor. "I beg your pardon?"

"Please stop—please listen." The girl gave a sharp laugh that came out unexpectedly and rather uncomfortably. "I see I've been even more of a fool than I thought. You've got the—the wrong impression. The man didn't—"

Suddenly she buried her face in her hands and spoke savagely from behind them. "It was nothing. I imagined it. I must be hysterical."

Derry, who had sat down again, kept quiet. He knew that women do sometimes get round to imagining things. This girl didn't seem at all like that. But no doubt it was a trouble that sometimes took hold of quite unexpected people.

"I mean that I imagined its *importance*. I certainly didn't imagine the *thing*. Nobody could have a—a hallucination of that sort."

As if nerving herself, the girl put her hands down and looked straight at Derry. "*Could* they?"

It was Derry who laughed this time—although he could scarcely have told why. "Look here," he said. "I think I *have* misunderstood. What was it?"

"It was his shoes."

For a moment the girl's glance was almost helpless, as if she was aware of the absurd anti-climax that this odd statement must produce.

"It was something about his shoes."

The engine shrieked, and the express plunged into a tunnel. In the wan electric light which had replaced the early summer sunshine, Derry stared at the girl blankly.

"You mean—this isn't about anything that *happened?*"

"No—or yes and no." For a moment the girl appeared to struggle for words. Then she squared herself where she sat. "May I tell you the whole thing?"

"Please do—I'm awfully curious." Derry spoke sincerely. The story, whatever it might be, was not going to be an awkward chronicle of attempted impropriety. "You did say *shoes*?"

"Yes. A brown shoe and a black one."

The train had returned to daylight. This did not prevent Derry Fisher from a sensation of considerable inner darkness. "You mean that this man—"

"Yes. He is wearing one brown shoe and one black . . . How incredibly trivial it sounds."

"I don't know. It's not a thing one ever sees."

"Exactly!" The girl looked gratefully at Derry. "And when you see it, it gives you a shock. But the real shock was when *he* saw that *I* saw it. You see?"

Derry smiled. "Not really. Hadn't you better start at the beginning?"

"The beginning was at Sheercliff. I thought I'd only just catch the train myself, but this man cut it even finer than I did. He tumbled in just as we started to move. With any sort of baggage he couldn't have managed it. But he had nothing but a brief case."

"Is he tidily dressed apart from this business of the shoes?"

The girl considered. "He certainly isn't noticeably untidy. But what chiefly strikes me about his clothes is that they look tremendously expensive. He's in the sort of tweeds that you could tell a mile off, and that must be terribly good if they're not to be ghastly."

"Is he a loud sort of person himself?"

"Not a bit. He's middle-aged and intellectual-looking, and quite clearly one of nature's First Class passengers. I think he jumped into a Third in a hurry and hasn't bothered to change. He simply put his brief case down beside him—there were only two of us in the com-

partment—and disappeared behind *The Times.*

"I had a book, and I didn't do much more than take a glance at him. It wasn't perhaps for half an hour that I noticed the shoes. They gave me a jar, as I've said. And although I went on reading, the queerness of it stuck in my head. So presently I had another look, just to make sure I hadn't been mistaken. And as I looked, *he* looked. That is to say, he happened to glance over *The Times,* saw the direction of my eyes, and followed it.

"What he discovered was a terrific shock to him. His legs jerked as if he'd been stung, and his feet made a futile effort to disappear beneath the seat. I looked up in surprise and just caught a glimpse of his face before he raised *The Times* again. He had gone a horrible gray, as if he was going to be sick. It made me feel a bit sick myself. And matters didn't improve when he turned chatty."

"But not, surely, about the shoes?"

"Yes, about the shoes. He put down his paper and apologized for them—just as if the compartment was my drawing room and he felt that he had come into it too casually dressed."

"He made a kind of joke of it?"

"That was what he seemed to intend. But he was very nervous. He was smoking those yellow cigarettes—aren't they called Russian? —and he kept stubbing out one and lighting another. He asked me if the shoes made him look like an absent-minded professor."

"And what did you say to that?"

Derry guessed that it was doing the girl good to talk about her queer encounter. And it sounded merely eccentric rather than sinister. Presently she ought to be able to see it as that.

"I said it didn't, somehow, look like a thing which absent-mindedness would explain. I said it *ought* to, that it was the sort of thing one might make an absent-minded person do in a story; but that when one actually *saw* it, that just didn't seem to fit."

Derry Fisher smiled. "You gave him quite good value for his money. It was what might be called a considerable reply."

"Perhaps. But he didn't like it." To Derry's surprise the girl's agitation was growing again. "I suppose I was tactless to do more than murmur vaguely. He stubbed out another cigarette, and I felt a queer tension suddenly established between us. It was a horrid sensation. And what he said next didn't at all ease it. He said I was quite right, and that he wasn't at all absent-minded. He was color blind."

Derry was puzzled. "That's certainly a bit odd. But I don't see—"

"I happened to know that it was almost certainly nonsense."

This time the girl sounded slightly impatient; and Derry de-

cided, quite without resentment, that she was cleverer than he was. "I'm not absolutely certain that color blindness of that sort doesn't exist. But I know that anything other than the ordinary red-green kind is excessively rare. So this was a very tall story. And, of course, I had another reason for disbelieving him. Wouldn't you agree?"

Derry stared. "I'm afraid I don't at all know."

"If this man *is* unable to distinguish between black and brown, he couldn't possibly have received such a shock the moment his glance fell on his shoes. Don't you see?"

"Yes—of course." Derry felt rather foolish. "And what happened then?"

"This time I didn't say anything. I felt, for some reason, really frightened. And I was even more frightened when I detected him cautiously trying the handle of the door."

"The door to the corridor?"

"No. The door on the other side."

Derry Fisher, although not brilliant, had a quick instinct for the moment when action was desirable.

"Look here," he said, "it's about time I had a look."

And with a reassuring glance at his companion he rose and stepped into the corridor.

They were moving at considerable speed and had been doing so steadily since some time before the beginning of his encounter with the frightened girl. He walked up the train in the direction she had indicated, glancing into each compartment as he passed. In one there was a group of young airmen, mostly asleep; in another a solitary lady of severe appearance seemed to be correcting examination papers; in a third an elderly clergyman and his wife were placidly chatting.

Derry came to the last compartment and saw at a glance that it was empty.

Conscious of being both disappointed and relieved, he stepped inside. The girl's green suitcase was on the rack. On the opposite seat lay an unfolded copy of *The Times*. There were three yellow cigarette butts on the floor. The window was closed.

Derry felt obscurely prompted to make as little physical impact on the compartment as might be. He picked up the suitcase and went out, shutting the corridor door behind him.

The girl was still sitting where he had left her, and he set the suitcase down beside her. "He's gone," he said.

"Gone! You don't think—"

"It's very unlikely that anything nasty has happened." Derry was reassuring. "The window is closed, and he couldn't have chucked himself out without opening the door. In that case, it would be open still. Nobody clinging to

the side of the train could get it shut again, even if he wanted to. Your tiresome friend has just made off to another carriage. It's the end of him—but quite harmlessly."

"He could only have gone in the other direction, or we'd have seen him."

"That's perfectly true. But he naturally would go off in the opposite direction to yourself. And the greater length of the train lies that way. It's more crowded, too, at that end. He realizes that he's made an ass of himself, and he's decided to submerge himself in the crush."

The girl nodded. "I suppose you're right. But I haven't really told you why I bolted." She hesitated. "It's too fantastic—too silly. I didn't think he had any notion of killing himself. I rather thought he was meaning to kill *me*."

The girl laughed—and it was her unsteady laugh again. "Isn't it a disgusting piece of hysteria? It must mean that my subconscious mind just won't bear looking into."

"Rubbish." Derry felt it incumbent to speak with some sternness. "This chap is a thoroughly queer fish. It was perfectly reasonable to feel that he might be quite irresponsible. You say he actually began fiddling with the door-handle?"

"Yes. And I really thought that he was thinking out what you might call two co-ordinated movements—getting the door open and pitching me through it. And when I did get up and leave, I felt that it was a terrific crisis for him. I sensed that he was all coiled up to hurl himself at me—and that he decided in the last fraction of a second that it wouldn't do."

The girl stood up. "But this is all too idiotic. And at least I already see it as that—thank goodness." She smiled rather wanly at Derry. "I shall go along and try the effect of a cup of coffee."

"May I come too?"

"I'd rather you didn't. But you've already been terribly kind. You've helped me pull myself together. It's just that I feel I can finish the job better alone."

Left in solitude, Derry Fisher reflected that he had learned very little about the girl herself—nothing at all, indeed, except the disturbing episode in which she had found herself involved. Might he, when she returned, ask for her name—or at least attempt a more general conversation?

The probability was that he would never see her again; and this was a fact which he found himself facing with lively dissatisfaction. Her appearance in his compartment had been the sort to make his imagination expect some further succession of strange events, some romantic sequel.

But when the girl did return, her own manner was notably prosaic. Coffee and reflection seemed further to have persuaded her that she

had already dramatized an insignificant circumstance too much. She remained grateful and talked politely. But Derry guessed that she felt awkward, and that at Waterloo she would be glad to say goodbye, both to him and to the whole incident.

So he forebore to make any suggestion for the bettering of their acquaintance. Only when the train reached the terminus he insisted on accompanying her through the barrier and to the taxi rank. The man who had scared her—the man with the black and brown shoes—must be somewhere in the crush; and if, as seemed likely, he was crazy, there was a possibility that he might bother her again.

But they caught no sight of him.

The girl gave an address in Kensington and stepped into her cab. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you so much."

Derry took his dismissal with a smile. "Goodbye," he said. "At least, you're safe and sound."

Her eyes widened, and then laughed at him. "Yes, indeed. He can't dispatch me now."

The cab moved off. Derry, stepping forward to wave regardless of the traffic, was nearly bowled over by one of the next cabs out; inside it, he glimpsed a man's amused face as he skipped nimbly to safety. He had been in danger, he saw, of making an ass of himself over that girl. He hurried off to catch a bus . . .

Shortly after lunch Derry went in to see his uncle—at present his employer, and soon, he hoped, to be his partner. Derry sat on one corner of his uncle's desk—a privilege which made him feel slightly less juvenile—and gave an account of himself. He described his few days at Sheercliff and his labors there on behalf of the firm.

His uncle listened with his customary mingling of scepticism and benevolent regard, and then proceeded to ask his customary series of mild but formidably searching questions. Eventually he moved to less austere ground. Had Derry got in any tennis? Had he found the usual agreeable persons to go dancing with?

On these topics, too, Derry offered what were by now prescriptive replies, whereupon his uncle buried his nose in a file and gave a wave which Derry knew was meant to waft him from the room.

All this was traditional. But as he reached the door his uncle looked up again. "By the way, my dear boy, I see you left Sheercliff just before the sensation there."

"The sensation, Uncle?" Only vaguely interested Derry saw his relative reach for a newspaper.

"An unidentified body found on the rocks in mysterious circumstances—that sort of thing."

"Oh." Derry was not much impressed.

"And there was something rather unaccountable. Now, where did I

see it?" Derry's uncle let his eye travel over the paper now spread out before him. "Yes—here it is. The body was fully dressed. But it was wearing one black shoe and one brown . . . My dear boy, are you ill? Too many late nights, if you ask me."

At nine o'clock that morning—it was his usual hour—Superintendent Lort had come on duty at Sheercliff Police Station and found Captain Merritt waiting for him. The circumstance gave Lort very little pleasure. He was an elderly man, soon to retire; and he had felt from the first that Merritt belonged to a world that had passed beyond him.

Merritt was an ex-army officer, and so to be treated with decent respect. His job was that of bodyguard—there could be no other name for it—to a certain Sir Stephen Borlase, who had been staying for some weeks at the Metropole Hotel. It was not apparent to Lort why Borlase should require protection other than that provided by the regular police.

Merritt, it appeared, was paid by the great industrial concern whose principal research chemist Borlase was. But it was an important Ministry that had yanked Merritt out of one of the regular Security Services and seconded him to the job. Borlase's research, it seemed, was very much a work of national importance. And so there was this irregular arrangement. This *most* irregular arrangement, Lort said to himself now—and greeted his visitor with a discouraging glare.

"Borlase has vanished." Merritt blurted out the words and sat down uninvited. He looked like a man whose whole career is in the melting pot. Probably it was.

"Vanished, sir? Since when?"

"Well, since last night—or rather very early this morning. I saw him then. But now he's gone. His bed hasn't been slept in."

"Do I understand, Captain Merritt, that it is part of your—um—employment to visit Sir Stephen Borlase's bedroom before nine a.m., and at once to communicate with the police if he isn't found there?"

"Of course not, man. The point is that he hasn't *slept* there. And that needs inquiring into at once."

"But surely, sir, such an inquiry is what you are—er—paid for?"

"Certainly. But I naturally expect the help of the police." Merritt was plainly angry. "Borlase is a damned important man. He is working now on the devil knows what."

"That probably describes it very well." And Lort smiled grimly. "But are we to raise an alarm because this gentleman fails to sleep in his hotel? I know nothing of his habits. But the fact that he has been provided with a somewhat unusual —um—companion in yourself, suggests to me that he may not be without a few quiet eccentricities."

"He's a brilliant and rather unstable man."

"I see. But this is not information that has been given us here in our humdrum course of duty. Do I understand it is thought possible that Sir Stephen may bolt?"

Merritt visibly hesitated. "That's not for me to say. I am instructed merely to be on guard on his behalf. And *you,* Superintendent, if I am not mistaken, have been instructed to give me any help you can."

"I have been instructed, sir, to recognize your function and to cooperate. Very well. What, in more detail, is the position? And what do you propose should be done?"

"Part of the position, Superintendent, I think you already know. Sir Stephen is here as a convalescent, but in point of fact he can't be kept from working all the time. Apparently his stuff is so theoretical and generally rarefied that he can do it all in his head, so all he needs to have about him is a file or two and a few notebooks.

"He has been pottering about the beach and the cliffs during the day, as his doctors have no doubt told him to do. And then, as often as not, he has been working late into the night. It has made my job the deuce of a bore."

"No doubt, sir." Lort was unsympathetic. "And last night?"

"He sat up until nearly one o'clock. I have a room from which I can see his windows, and it has become my habit not to go to bed myself until he seems safely tucked up. You can judge from that how this job has come to worry me. Well, out went his lights in the end, and I was just about to undress when I heard him open the outer door of his suite.

"He went downstairs. It seemed to me I'd better follow; and when I reached the hall, there he was giving a nod to the night porter and walking out of the hotel. He hadn't changed for dinner, and in his tweeds he might have been a visitor leaving the place for good. He was merely bent, however, on a nocturnal stroll."

"It was a pleasant night, no doubt." Lort offered this comment impassively.

"Quite so. Sir Stephen's proceeding was no more than mildly eccentric. But if I'd let him wander off like that in the small hours, and if anything *had* happened, it would have been just too bad for both of us. So I took that stroll too—some fifty yards in the rear.

"He went straight through the town and took the short cliff path out to Merlin Head. It's an extremely impressive spot in full moonlight, with the sheer drop to the sea looking particularly awe-inspiring, I imagine. Of course there was nobody about. And as there is only the one narrow path to the Head, I didn't follow him to the end of it. He doesn't like being dogged around."

"I'm not surprised." Lort was emphatic. "I don't know what things are coming to that such antics should be considered necessary in a quiet place like this. But go on."

"You will remember that there's a little shelter on the verge of the Head, with a bench from which you can command the whole sweep of the bay. Borlase disappeared into that, but didn't sit for long. Within ten minutes he was making his way back towards me —and at that I slipped out of sight and followed him discreetly back to the hotel.

"Perhaps I should mention having a feeling that there was something on his mind. His walk out to the Head had been direct and decisive. But on the way back he hesitated several times, as if doing a bit of wool-gathering. So I kept well in the background, and he had gone to his bedroom by the time I re-entered the hotel. I waited, as usual, until his lights were out, and then I turned in."

"And now, you say, he has vanished?"

"Yes. I've got into the way of taking him his letters in the morning. That is how I've discovered that he never went to bed at all."

Lort frowned. "But you say all the lights went out in his suite? Could there have been one still burning when you went to bed yourself—one that wouldn't be visible to you?"

"I think not."

"And the night porter? Was he aware of Borlase's leaving again?"

"No. But he potters around a little, although not supposed to quit the hall. I doubt if it was difficult for Borlase to let himself out unobserved."

Merritt paused. "And that, Superintendent, is the position now. What do you make of it?"

"I'm far from feeling obliged to make anything of it at all." Lort allowed himself some tartness in this reply. "Here is a man, devoted to abstruse scientific thought, who takes a reflective stroll at one o'clock in the morning. Moonlight doesn't help with whatever problem he's chewing over, so for a time he sits in the dark and tries that.

"Presently he wanders out again, and very probably walks till morning. Eventually he emerges from his abstraction, discovers himself to be uncommonly hungry, breakfasts at the first inn he sees, returns to Sheercliff at his leisure, and finds that the conscientious Captain Merritt has persuaded the police to start a manhunt."

And Lort favored his visitor with a bleak smile. "The truth may not be precisely that. But my guess is that I'm well within the target area."

"I see." Merritt had produced his watch and glanced at it. Now he put it away and turned a cold eye on the elderly and sardonic man

before him. "And you think mine a very odd job?"

"I do, sir—decidedly."

"And so it is, Superintendent. But then Borlase, as it happens, is a very odd man. Just how odd, I think I must now take the responsibility of telling you."

"I am very willing, sir, to hear anything that makes sense of your anxieties."

"Very well—here goes." Merritt paused as if to collect himself. "Perhaps I can best begin by repeating what I have just said—but with a difference. The Borlases are a very odd couple of men."

Lort stared. "You mean there is a brother—something like that?"

"I mean nothing of the sort. I mean that Sir Stephen Borlase—the man stopping at the Metropole Hotel—is much more easily understood as two people than as one."

Lort sat back in his chair. "Jekyll and Hyde?"

"Or Hyde and Jekyll. That is undoubtedly the popular expression of the thing, and perhaps the best for laymen like you and me, Superintendent, to hang on to. Or possibly we might think of him as a sort of Hamlet—the man who couldn't make up his mind."

"Frankly, sir, I don't find this easy to believe. I suppose Dr. Jekyll may have been a man of some scientific attainment, but I can't see Hamlet as an eminent research chemist."

"Perhaps not." Merritt took a moment to estimate the cogency of this pronouncement. "But the fact is that Borlase combines immense drive and concentration as a scientist with a highly unstable personality. Commonly his ideological convictions are very much those of any other man of his sort in our society. For the greater part of his days, that is to say, he is completely reliable. But every now and then he is subject to a fit of emotional and intellectual confusion, and from this there emerges for a short time what is virtually a different personality.

"It's an awkward thing in the days of the cold war, as you can see. Let certain folk effectively contact Borlase when he has swung over to this other polarity—this other set of values—and goodness knows what they might not get out of him. And now I think you can understand why I was given my 'unusual' job—and why I think the present situation genuinely alarming."

"I still feel, sir, that I've a good deal to learn." Lort was clearly preparing to plod doggedly round the strange story with which he had been presented. "Am I to understand that Sir Stephen Borlase is fully aware of his own condition?"

"In a general way—yes. But he plays it down. When normal, he declines to admit that these periods of disturbance go, so to speak, at all deep. He won't treat himself as

potentially a mental case. Nothing in the way of regular visits by the appropriate sort of medical man would be tolerated by him. So he has been persuaded that he is in the first flight of V.I.P.s—as indeed he pretty well is—and provided with—"

"—the new style of guardian angel represented by yourself." Lort, having given his cautious antagonism this further airing, reached for a scribbling pad as if to indicate that the matter had entered a new phase. "Have you been given to understand that there does now exist against Borlase a specific threat? Are there, in fact, supposed to be persons aware of his condition and actively planning to exploit it?"

"It is thought very likely that there are—particularly a fellow called Krauss."

"I see. And you have been told what signs to look for in Borlase himself?"

"He is said to go moody, restless, distraught—that sort of thing."

Lort nodded. "What about the last few days? Has he appeared all right?"

"The devil of it is, Superintendent, that he has always appeared a bit of a queer fish to me. I can't claim to have noticed any change in the last few days."

"Then, Captain Merritt, it remains my guess that this is a false alarm. When did you leave the Metropole—half an hour ago? Likely enough, Borlase has returned in the interval. I'll call the place up and find out."

Two telephones stood on Lort's desk—and now, as he was in the act of reaching for one, the second emitted a low but urgent purr.

The Superintendent picked it up. "Yes . . . Yes . . . Dead, you say? . . . *Where*?"

Lort's glance, as he listened, fleetingly sought Merritt's face. "The *tide*? If that was so, you did perfectly right . . . Unidentified? I hope he remains so . . . I said, I hope he remains so . . . Never mind why . . . Yes, of course—within ten minutes. Thank you."

When Lort had snapped down the receiver, there was a moment's silence. Merritt had gone pale, and when he spoke it was with a curious striving for a casual note. "Not, I suppose, anything to do with—?"

"Probably not." Lort was on his feet. "Still, you might care to come along—just in case."

"In case—?"

"In case it *is* the body of Sir Stephen Borlase that has just been found below Merlin Head."

"Accident?"

The Superintendent reached for his cap. "That's what we're going to find out."

The sky was almost cloudless, the air filled with a mild warmth, the sea sparkling within its far-flung semicircle of gleaming cliffs. On the front and in the broad tree-

lined streets, visitors made their way to and from the baths, the Winter Gardens, the circulating libraries, or exercised well-bred dogs with due regard to the cleanliness and decorum which is so marked a feature of the Sheercliff scene.

As he drove the agitated Captain Merritt through this pleasing pageant, Superintendent Lort discernibly let his spirits rise. But the effect of this was only to give a more sardonic turn to his speech. An accident, he pointed out, whether in the sea or on the cliffs, was an undesirable thing. The City Council deprecated accidents. Accidents were dissuasive; potential visitors read about them and decided to go elsewhere.

But a crime was another matter. Many pious and law-abiding Sheercliff citizens would ask for nothing better than a really sensational crime. The present season, it was true, was somewhat early. Even a murder extensively featured in the national Press would have little effect on Metropole or Grand or Majestic folk. But the August crowds—the true annual bearers of prosperity to the town—were another matter. A course of events culminating in the Central Criminal Court in about the third week of July, Superintendent Lort opined, would probably take threepence off the rates.

Captain Merritt showed no appreciation of this unexpected vein of pleasantry in his professional colleague. He sat silent during the drive. He remained silent in the small Police Station which they entered at the end of it. Here a melancholy sergeant led them out to a shed at the back for the purpose, as he expressed it, of viewing the remains. This, however, was for some minutes delayed. With a due sense of climax the sergeant chose to pause in the intervening yard and favor his superior with a fuller account of the case.

An elderly clergyman, early abroad in the interest of birdwatching, had been the first to peer over Merlin Head and see the body. It lay sprawled on an isolated outcrop of rock at the base of the cliff, and only by an unlikely chance had it not fallen directly into the sea. Had this happened, it would probably have disappeared—at least, as an identifiable individual—for good. For the currents played strange tricks on this coast, and it was only after some weeks that the sea commonly rendered up its dead.

On this point the sergeant was disposed to be expansive. "Nibbled, sir—that's how they often are. Some quite small fish, it seems, are uncommonly gross feeders. But come along."

On this macabre note the three men entered the shed. The body lay on a long table, covered with a sheet. The sergeant stepped forward and drew back the sheet so that the face was revealed.

"It's your man, all right." Lort's voice was decently subdued.

"It's my man." Merritt, very pale, glanced at the sergeant. "Any certainty how it happened?"

"The back of the head's stove in. He might have been hit, and then thrown over the cliff. Or he might just have jumped and the damage been done by the rocks. The surgeon thinks they'll be able to tell just which, once they've gone into the body more particular."

"I see." Merritt moved closer to the body, gave a startled exclamation, and drew the sheet down farther. "It's Sir Stephen Borlase, all right. But those aren't his clothes. At least, I never saw him in them."

Lort frowned. "He wasn't dressed like this when you followed him last night?"

"He wasn't in anything like this dark stuff at all. He was in country kit—a tweed with rather a bold pattern."

"Peculiar." Lort turned to the sergeant. "Anything on those clothes—a tailor's label with the owner's name, for instance?"

"Nothing of the sort, sir. I'd say they were ordinary, good-class, off-the-peg garments. But there's something queer about the shoes."

"They don't fit?" Lort pounced on this.

"It's not that. It's *this*.."

The sergeant, his sense of drama reasserting itself, whipped away the sheet altogether. "Did you ever see a corpse in one black shoe and one brown?"

"Suicide." Lort had driven halfway back through Sheercliff before he spoke. "Suicide planned so that it could never be proved. Borlase was simply going to disappear. When you followed him last night —or rather early this morning—he was spying out the land. Or it might be better to say the cliff and the sea."

"Look before you leap?" Merritt was moodily stuffing a pipe.

"Just that. And perhaps he didn't like what he saw. You told me that he walked up there briskly enough, yet his return to the Metropole was a bit irresolute. But he went through with the thing. Knowing that he had to give you the slip this time, he changed into those anonymous clothes in the dark—which is how he managed to land himself with different-colored shoes."

"That may be true." Merritt was suddenly interested. "And the shoes were, in fact, to give him away! It might be one of those odd tricks of the mind—and particularly of a mind like Borlase's. Part of him didn't want anonymity and extinction—so he made this unconsciously motivated mistake and betrayal. An instance of what Freud calls the psychopathology of everyday life."

"No doubt." Superintendent Lort did not appear to feel that his picture of the case was much strengthened by this speculation.

"Well, Borlase slipped out again later, and simply pitched himself over Merlin Head. He reckoned to go straight into the sea and to be drawn out by the current. Later we might or might not have got back an unrecognizable body in unidentifiable clothes. Of course, further investigation may prove me wrong. But I'd say it's a fair working supposition. Do you agree?"

Without interrupting the business of lighting his pipe, Captain Merritt shook his head. "I don't see it. Borlase was an odd chap, or I wouldn't have been given my job. He might, I suppose, feel driven to take his own life. And he might feel the act to be disgraceful—as something to disguise. But why not disguise it as an accident? He had plenty of brains to work out something convincing in that way. Why should he try to make his death look like an unaccountable disappearance?"

"Might it be because he disliked you, sir?"

"What's that?" Merritt was startled.

"I mean, of course, disliked the way you'd been set on him. He resented having a jailer disguised as a bodyguard—and quite right too, if you ask me." Lort delivered himself of this sentiment with vigor. "So he resolved to leave you in as awkward a situation as he could. Had he seemed just to clean vanish, you'd have been left looking decidedly a fool."

"I see." Merritt digested this view of the matter in silence for some seconds. And when at length he pronounced upon it, it was with unexpected urbanity. "Well, Borlase is dead, poor devil—and it's a bad mark for me either way. I'll be quite content myself if your interpretation is accepted by the Coroner."

"But you doubt whether it will be?"

"I do." And Merritt puffed at his pipe with a somber frown. "My guess is that there's more to come out, Superintendent. And probably with more bad marks attached. The country has lost Stephen Borlase. I have a nasty feeling it may have lost something else as well."

Derry Fisher felt rather like the Bellman. "What I tell you three times is true." It was just that number of times that he had now told his story: first to his uncle, then at the local Police Station, and now—rather to his awe—to Sir John Appleby, high up in this quiet room in New Scotland Yard.

Appleby himself, Derry saw, must be pretty high up. He was, in fact, a Commissioner. Derry was already guessing that the strange situation in which he found himself involved was important as well as conventionally sensational.

Appleby was not at all portentous. His idea of police investigation appeared to be friendly and at times mildly whimisical conversation. But

Derry sensed that he was feeling pretty serious underneath.

"And you say you saw this girl into a taxi? But of course you did. Pretty or not, it was the natural and proper thing for you to do. And then you took the next taxi yourself?"

"No, sir." Derry shook his head, genuinely amused. "I found my natural level on top of a bus."

"Quite so. Taxi queues at these big stations are often longer than bus queues, anyway. I suppose there was a queue—streams of taxis going out?"

"Yes, sir. Parts of our train had been pretty crowded. I had to wait a moment while several more taxis shot past. One of them nearly bowled me over."

"Did you find yourself staring at people's shoes?"

Derry burst out laughing. "As a matter of fact, I did. I keep on doing it now."

"You do, indeed. You had a look at mine the instant you entered this room." And Appleby smiled genially at his embarrassed visitor. "You'd make a good detective, Mr. Fisher, I don't doubt. And you tell your story very clearly."

"To tell you the truth, sir, I'm very relieved to find it credited. It seems so uncommonly queer."

"We get plenty of queer yarns in this place." Appleby companionably held out a box of cigarettes. "But of yours, as a matter of fact, we have a scrap of confirmation already."

Derry Fisher sat up eagerly. "You've heard from the girl?"

"Not yet—although we ought to hear today, if she ever looks at a newspaper or listens to the radio. Unless, of course—" Appleby checked himself. "What we've had is news of an angry traveler at Waterloo, complaining of theft from his suitcase while he was absent from his compartment."

"Isn't that sort of thing fairly common?"

"Common enough. But this was on your train from Sheercliff this morning. And what was stolen was a pair of shoes—nothing else. I've no doubt that you see the likely significance of that. By the time you had got to Waterloo, there was certainly nobody on your train in the embarrassing position of wearing a discernibly odd pair of shoes. Only the dead body in Sheercliff was still doing that . . . By the way, have you any ideas about this?"

Derry, although startled, answered boldly. "Yes, sir. At least, I see one way that it might have come about. The two men—this Sir Stephen Borlase who is dead and the man who was on the train—for some reason changed clothes rather hastily in the dark. And they mixed up the shoes."

Appleby nodded approvingly. "That's very good. Borlase, as a matter of fact, has been found in clothes which, it seems, can't be positively identified as his. Correspondingly, the clothes which your girl de-

scribed as worn by the fellow on the train sound uncommonly like those being worn by Borlase when he was last seen alive. He may, of course, have been dead when the exchange took place. Indeed, that would seem to be the likely way of it. I wonder, now, what it would be like, changing clothes with a dead man—say, with a murdered man—in the dark."

"I'm sure I'd mix up a good deal more than the shoes." Derry Fisher's conviction was unfeigned. "One would have to possess nerves of steel to do so ghastly a thing."

"Either that or be in an uncommonly tight corner. You'd be surprised at the things that timid or even craven people will brace themselves to when really up against it."

Appleby paused, then mused, "But aren't we supposing a darkness that can't really have been there? Unless, of course, we can place the thing in a cave or cellar or shuttered room."

"The moonlight!"

"Precisely. I asked myself about that during my last phone call to Sheercliff half an hour ago. There can be no doubt that there was a full moon in an unclouded sky. I daresay you were aware of it yourself."

"Yes, sir. As a matter of fact, I was dancing in it."

"Then, there you are." Appleby appeared much pleased. "Are you fond of Rubens as a landscape painter?"

"Rubens?" Derry felt incapable of this abrupt transition to a polite cultural topic. "I'm afraid I don't know much about him."

"He has one or two great things done in full moonlight. Everything marvelously clear, you know, but at the same time largely drained of color." Appleby chuckled. "If you knocked me out by the light of the moon, Mr. Fisher, you could exchange clothes with me without the slightest difficulty. But you might very well go wrong over brown and black shoes. My guess is that they wouldn't be indistinguishable to a careful scrutiny, but that they would be the next thing to it . . . And now I must really go across to Waterloo. I should be greatly obliged if you'd come along."

"While you investigate?"

"Just that. You might be a great help to me."

"I'll certainly come." Derry stood up—and suddenly a new view of this invitation came to him. "You don't mean to lose sight of me?"

"That is so." For the first time Appleby spoke with real gravity. "You may as well know, Mr. Fisher, that this affair may be very serious indeed. Nobody will be lost sight of until it is cleared up."

"You make me wish I hadn't lost sight of the girl."

"I wish you had not. We must face the fact that she is the only person who can identify the man on the train—the living man in the odd shoes."

Slowly it dawned on Derry. "And I—?"

"You are the only person who can identify the girl, supposing—well, that she is no longer in a position to speak up for herself."

"You think she may be in danger?"

"I'd like to know who was in the next taxi or two after hers."

It chanced that the morning train from Sheercliff had been neither broken up nor cleaned through, and a clerk led them to it over what, to Derry, seemed miles and miles of sidings. It stood forlorn, dusty, and dead, in the rather bleak late-afternoon sunshine.

Once aboard, Derry had less difficulty than he had expected in identifying the compartment in which his adventure had begun. It looked very impersonal and uninteresting now. He felt suddenly depressed, and watched with growing scepticism the minutely careful search that Sir John Appleby made.

"This fellow who complained of losing shoes," Appleby said. "Where was he?"

The clerk consulted some papers. "We have a note of that, sir. It was three carriages down, next to the dining car. The passenger had gone to get himself an early lunch, leaving his suitcase on the seat of the empty compartment. When he got back, he found it open, with the contents tumbled about, and a pair of shoes missing. Of course he has no claim."

"Except on our interest." Appleby turned to Derry. "Now, I wonder why our elusive friend didn't substitute his own troublesome footwear and close the case? That *would* have given the other fellow a bit of a shock. But perhaps it was no occasion for a display of humor."

Appleby spoke absently. His glance was still darting about the uncommunicative compartment, as if reluctant to give up. Then he stepped into the corridor and moved up the train.

"A group of airmen," he said, "mostly asleep. A solitary lady. A clergyman and his wife. Is that right?"

Derry nodded. "Quite right."

"And then the compartment where your girl made her awkward observation. If you don't mind, I'll go into this one alone."

He did so, and moved about as if the whole place was made of eggshell. Derry watched fascinated. His scepticism was entirely gone. To his own eye the compartment looked blank and meaningless. Yet it suddenly seemed impossible that to so intent and concentrated scrutiny it should not at once yield some decisive fact.

"You can still smell what she called the Russian cigarettes." Appleby spoke over his shoulder. "And here are the three yellow stubs you saw yourself. I at once produce pill boxes and forceps. Also a pocket lens."

Derry glimpsed the railway clerk watching wide-eyed as Appleby ac-

tually performed these legendary operations. "I sniff. This tobacco—my dear Watson—is manufactured only in Omsk. Or is it Tomsk? At any rate, I distinctly begin to see Red. Only Commissars are ever issued with this particular brand. The plot thickens. The vanished man has a slight cast in his left eye. A joint—one of the lower ones—is missing from his right forefinger . . ."

On this surprising rubbish Appleby's voice died away. Regardless of the two men waiting in the corridor, he painfully explored the confined space around him for a further fifteen minutes. When he emerged he was wholly serious. And Derry Fisher thought that he saw something like far-reaching speculation in his eye.

"Those young airmen, Mr. Fisher—you say they were asleep?"

"Not all of them."

"And the clergyman and his wife?"

"Chatting and admiring the view."

"On the far side?"

"No, the corridor side."

"And the solitary lady?"

"She struck me as a headmistress, or something of that sort. She was working at papers."

"Absorbed in them?"

"Well—not entirely. I think I remember her giving me rather a formidable glance as I went by. You think these people may have seen something important, sir?"

"They are a factor, undoubtedly." Appleby was glancing at his watch. "I must get back. The mystery of the rifled suitcase is something that we needn't pursue. What we want is your girl. And there ought to be word of her by now. What would be your guess about her when she reads all this in the papers? Is she the sort who might lose her head or panic and lie low?"

"I'm sure she's not. She would see it was her duty to come forward, and she'd do so."

"Kensington, you said—and you absolutely didn't hear any more?" Appleby had dropped to the line and they were now tramping through a wilderness of deserted rolling stock. "And you gleaned absolutely nothing about her connections—profession, reason for having been in Sheercliff, and so on?"

"I'm afraid I didn't." Derry hesitated. "It wasn't because I didn't want to. But she'd had this shock, and it would have seemed impertinent—"

"Quite so." Appleby was curtly approving. "But I wish we had just the beginning of a line on her, all the same."

Derry Fisher for some reason felt his heart sink. "You really do think, sir, that she may be in danger?"

"Certainly she is in danger. We must find her as soon as we can."

Back in his room half an hour later, and with Derry still in tow, Appleby was making a long-distance call.

"Stephen Borlase?" The cultivated voice from Cambridge wasted no time. "Yes, certainly. I have no doubt that I count as one of his oldest friends. The news has saddened me very much. A wonderful brain, and on the verge of great things . . . Mentally unbalanced? My dear sir, we all are—except conceivably at Scotland Yard. I know they were worried about Stephen, but if I were you I'd take it with a pinch of salt. He was not nearly so mad as Mark is if you ask me."

"Mark?"

"Mark Borlase—Stephen's cousin. Haven't you made contact with him?" The voice from Cambridge seemed surprised. "Mark is certainly next of kin . . . Address? I know only that he lives in a windmill. From time to time I should imagine that he goes out and tilts at it . . . Precisely—an eccentric. He goes in for unworldliness and absence of mind . . . The same interests as Stephen? Dear me, no. Mark is literary—wrote a little book on Pushkin, and is a bit of an authority on Russian literature in general. An interesting but ineffective type."

"Thank you very much." Appleby was scribbling on a desk pad. "Just one more thing. I wonder if you can tell me anything significant about Sir Stephen's methods of work?"

"Yes." The voice from Cambridge took on extra precision. "It happened in his head, and went straight into a small notebook which he kept in an inner pocket. That—and perhaps a few loose papers lying rather too carelessly about—was nowadays pretty well his whole stock-in-trade. I hope that notebook's safe."

"So do I. Sir Stephen had a bodyguard who ought to have kept an eye on all that. I expect to reach him at any time. You'd say that the notebook may be very important indeed?"

"My God!" And the telephone in Cambridge went down with a click.

As Appleby dropped his own receiver into place, a secretary entered the room. "A caller, sir—somebody I think you'll want to see about this Sheercliff affair."

Derry Fisher was conscious of sitting up with a jerk as Appleby swung round to ask crisply, "Not the girl?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. A cousin of the dead man. He gives his name as Mark Borlase."

"Bring him in." Appleby turned back to Derry. "Lives in a windmill and pops up as if he were answering a cue. He may interest you, Mr. Fisher, even though he's not your girl. So stay where you are."

Derry did as he was told. Mark Borlase was a middle-aged, cultivated, untidy man. He had a charming smile and restless, tobacco-stained hands. His manner was decidedly vague, and one felt at once that his natural occupation was wool-gathering. Only good breeding and a sense of social duty, Derry guessed, kept him from relapsing into complete abstraction.

"Sir John Appleby? My name is Borlase. They got hold of me from Sheercliff, and asked me to come along and see you here. This about Stephen is very sad. I liked him, and hope he liked me. We had nothing to say to each other, I'm afraid—nothing at all. But he was a good sort of person in his dry way. I'm very sorry that his end should be a matter of policemen and inquests and so forth. I wonder what I can do?"

As he spoke, Mark Borlase produced a pair of glasses from a breast pocket and clipped them on his nose "Perhaps I could identify the body—something like that?"

And Mark Borlase looked slowly round the room, as if confidently expecting a corpse in a corner. Not finding this, he let his glance rest mildly on Derry Fisher instead. "This your boy?"

"Your cousin's body is naturally at Sheercliff, Mr. Borlase. It has been adequately identified. And this gentleman is not my son"—Appleby smiled faintly—"but Mr. Derry Fisher, who happened to travel up from Sheercliff this morning in circumstances which give him an interest in your cousin's death."

"From Sheercliff this morning? How do you do." And Mark Borlase gave Derry a smile which, for some reason, sent a prickling sensation down the young man's spine. "You were a friend of poor Stephen's?"

"No—nothing of that sort. I never knew him. It's just that on the train I ran across a—another passenger who'd had a queer experience—one that seems to connect with Sir Stephen's death. That's why the police are interested in me."

"Indeed." Mark Borlase did not appear to find this ingenuous explanation sufficiently significant to hold his attention. He turned his mild gaze again to Appleby. "They say, you know, that there were times when Stephen wasn't quite himself."

"But you have no personal experience of that?"

"I didn't see him very often. Of course, we corresponded occasionally."

"About what?"

Mark Borlase seemed momentarily at a loss. "Well—don't you know—this and that."

"You said a moment ago that you and Sir Stephen had nothing at all to say to each other. Can you be a little more specific about the this and that which were mentioned in your letters?"

"As a matter of fact"—and Mark Borlase hesitated—"Stephen got me to look at things for him from time to time."

"Things, Mr. Borlase?"

"Articles in Russian. It's my subject."

"I see." And Appleby nodded. "Articles, that would be, in learned and scientific journals? Sir Stephen's own stuff?"

"Dear me, no." Mark Borlase evinced a sort of absent-minded

amusement. "I'm a literary person, and would be no good on anything technical. Stephen had his own experts to do all that sort of thing."

"Philosophy, then—and sociology and so forth? He used you to acquaint himself with untranslated writings of—well, an ideological cast?"

Mark Borlase's hand moved uneasily. "Is this what they call a security check? But it *was* matter of that sort. Stephen had an intermittent—but occasionally intense—interest in Communist theory and the like. I'm bound to confess that it irritated me very much. Not the doctrine—I don't give twopence for one political doctrine or another—but the style. I like my Russian good."

"You would have viewed with indifference your cousin's entering upon treasonable courses, but would have deprecated his continued concern with inelegant Russian prose?"

Rather surprisingly, Mark Borlase was on his feet and flushing darkly. "Damn it all, man, you understand the conversation of gentlemen better than that. I don't give a tinker's curse, I say, for one or another sort of hot air. But of course I wouldn't have a kinsman make a fool of himself and disgrace the family if I could help it. I used to translate or explain whatever rubbish Stephen in these occasional fits sent along—and do my best to laugh at him for his pains."

"And you were never seriously uneasy?"

Mark Borlase's hesitation was just perceptible. "Never. I realize there has been a certain amount of sinister talk. Stephen himself told me that some fool of a Cabinet Minister had decided he was a dangerously split personality, and that Stephen had been plagued with a lot of nonsense as a result. For all I know, such idiocy may have driven Stephen to suicide."

"I sincerely hope not." Appleby's tone was sober. "And I am sorry, Mr. Borlase, to have had to sound you on some rather unpleasant ground. It was good of you to come along so quickly. One of my assistants may want a little routine information at your convenience in a day or two. At the moment I have only one further question. When did you see your cousin last?"

This time Mark Borlase answered promptly. "Six weeks ago. And he was perfectly well. I'm at the Wessex, by the way, should you want me."

"Thank you very much."

For some moments after the door closed on Mark Borlase there was silence. Appleby sat quite still, lost in thought. Then he turned to Derry. "Well?"

"I've seen him before."

"What!"

"I've seen him before. It came to me when he smiled. I've seen him quite recently."

"Be careful, man." Appleby had sat up at his desk, square and severe. "This sort of thing is new to you

—and sometimes it sets people to fancying things. We don't want a false scent. So think."

Derry's mouth was dry and he guessed that he looked strange For a full minute he, too, sat quite still. "I *know* I've seen him recently—and it connects with Sheercliff."

"Mark may be like Stephen in personal appearance. And you may have caught a glimpse of Stephen down there in the streets."

"No—I've seen *him.*" Derry felt his hear pounding. "In a taxi . . . smiling . . . driving out of Waterloo today."

Sir John Appleby appeared quite unsurprised. "That is capital. It looks as if we are on the track of something at last. Let us suppose that you are not mistaken. The overwhelmingly probable inference is that Mark Borlase has himself been down to Sheercliff, and indeed traveled back by the same train as yourself."

"Then he lied, didn't he? He said he hadn't seen his cousin for six weeks."

"It certainly sounds like a lie. But he may have gone down intending to see Stephen, and then for some reason changed his mind. You didn't manage to see how he was dressed?"

Derry shook his head. "I'm afraid not. He *may* have been in those tweeds of Stephen's. All I saw was his face—leaning forward, and rather amused that I had to skip out of the way of his cab. But look here, sir"—Derry was suddenly urgent—"it was the cab immediately behind the girl's. *Could* he have followed it, and tracked her down? Can one really tell a taxi driver to do that? It's always happening in stories."

Appleby smiled. "Certainly one can. Men occasionally want to follow girls without necessarily having it in mind to commit murder. You can imagine cases in which the motive might even be laudable. And most taxi drivers wouldn't mind a bit of a chase. Try it, some time."

Derry, although accustomed by now to the intermittent levity of the Commissioner, was rather shocked. "But, sir, oughtn't we . . . I mean, if there's a chance he knows where to find her—"

"Quite so. One or two arrangements must certainly be made." Appleby was scribbling as he spoke, and now he touched a bell. "Here they are." He held up a sheet of paper and then handed it to his secretary. "See that this is acted on at once, Hunt, please. And are there any developments?"

"Captain Merritt just arrrived, sir."

"Excellent. Show him in." Appleby turned to Derry. "The man who knows all about the Sheercliff end. It will be a bad business if we don't get somewhere now." He frowned. "And also, perhaps, if we do."

Captain Merritt was military, brisk, and (Derry suspected) in-

wardly somewhat shattered. He listened to what Appleby had to say, nodded an introduction to the young man, and plunged straight into his own narrative.

"I waited in Sheercliff for the doctors to make up their minds. It seems there can be no doubt about what happened, and that the local man's notion of suicide is all wrong. Borlase was killed by a terrific blow on the head, and then within a few minutes was pitched over the cliff. I've tried to get medical help on the clothes. You know how scalp wounds, even when only superficial, bleed in a profuse and alarming way? I wondered if the clothes he was wearing when killed would remain wearable and presentable."

Appleby nodded. "A good point."

"But the leeches won't be positive one way or the other. It isn't certain there would have been any great mess. It's my bet now that the murderer stripped the dead man of his clothes and got him into the ones he was found in."

"I agree." Appleby was incisive. "But why? What was the situation?"

"*I* was the situation, if you ask me." And Merritt laughed, but without much mirth. "As I see it now, the murder happened not on a second trip of Sir Stephen's to Merlin Head, but on the first and only trip. I saw Sir Stephen go up there. I thought I saw him come down. But all I really saw were his clothes. In fact, I came a first-class crash."

"It's certainly a possibility." Appleby spoke with a hint of professional commiseration. "And can you name the man who fooled you?"

"Krauss."

Appleby nodded. "I gather he may be involved. The Minister made a great point of it when he phoned me this morning."

"You see, Krauss—" Merritt hesitated. "Is Mr. Fisher here interested in Krauss?"

Appleby smiled. "I don't think it will much endanger the country, Mr. Fisher, to tell you about Krauss. He is a foreign agent whom we suspect of specializing in approaching scientists with the object of extracting secret information from them. Krauss's is the ideological and not the venal approach. We don't know that he has ever had much success. But it is believed that he keeps on trying. And Captain Merritt is perfectly correct in saying that Krauss is supposed to have been on the track of Sir Stephen Borlase. So Krauss is a likely suspect enough."

Appleby turned to his colleague. "Fisher and I, as it happens, have another one. But carry on."

"Another suspect?" Merritt was startled.

"Not a bad one. But first come, first served. So continue."

Merritt laughed. "Very well. Here is the crime as I see it. Stephen Borlase was an unstable fellow, with fits in which he didn't very well know his own mind on certain vital mat-

ters. As a result, Krauss got a long way with him—got, in fact, as far as Merlin Head in the small hours of this morning.

"He persuaded Borlase to an appointment there—to a moonlight conference in the little shelter by the cliff edge. The meeting, however, was a failure. Borlase was not disposed, after all, to see treason as a higher duty. Conceivably he never was. These, after all, are jumpy times. If they were not, some of us would be out of a job."

"Quite so."

"Krauss, then, was stuck. And, being stuck, he struck." Merritt paused, as if mildly surprised at his own command of the resources of English. "Primarily he was out to suborn Borlase. But there was this other possibility. Borlase carried on his person notes that were the vital growing point of his researches. These would be enormously worth stealing—and particularly if the brain capable of producing them could simultaneously be destroyed forever. That is why Krauss killed Borlase."

"If he did."

"I'm only putting a case." Merritt was patient. "Now, what would be the first thing one would do after committing murder and robbery? I think one would scout around. Krauss took a peer out from that cliff shelter—and just glimpsed me at the far end of the path leading to it. He would realize the situation and see that is was pretty grim."

"Grim enough to take the fantastic risk of donning Borlase's clothes and hoping to evade you that way?"

"Yes. And it wasn't really so fantastic. He would know I was being as unobtrusive as possible, and that I would keep well back."

"It's a first-class hypothesis." Appleby drummed absently on the desk before him. "But one point worries me. Borlase was found in *entirely* strange clothes? Why a *complete* exchange? And why bother to redress the corpse at all?"

"Krauss suddenly tumbled to the significance of the cliff, the sea, and the currents. With luck, he could get rid of the body for days or weeks. That would be valuable in itself. Moreover, if it was then recovered entirely unidentifiable, either in its own person or by any of its clothes, the eminent Sir Stephen Borlase would simply have disappeared without explanation. There was a neat little propaganda trick to take in that."

"Very well. Krauss—or another—effects this change of clothes and then pitches the body into the sea. Or rather, *not* into the sea. It lands on a small outcrop of rock. And so the murderer's plan—as you see it, that is—partly fails. Now, there is a point that occurs to me there. Suppose the murderer, for some reason, was—so to speak—*aiming* not at the sea but at that rock. Would it have been a practical target? Could he have reckoned on keeping the body *from* the sea?"

Merritt frowned. "I'm not clear about the bearing of your question."

"Conceivably it has none. But one ought, I think, to consider the question *Accident or design?* on every occasion that one possibly can."

"I entirely agree." Merritt thought for a moment. "Yes, I think the rock would prove, if one experimented, a reasonably easy target."

"Well, then—let's go on. The disguised Krauss, with Borlase's notebook in his pocket, does succeed in getting past you."

"I'm afraid so. But he is by no means out of the wood. There I am, discreetly behind him. If he wants to avoid suspicion, there is only one natural thing for him to do at the end of this nocturnal stroll. He must return to Borlase's hotel. He must accept the risk of being confronted, face on, by a night porter. Moreover, he probably has no more than Borlase's key as a clue to what room he must make for. And he must find it before I, in my turn, regain the Metropole."

"In fact, it was all pretty sticky—without knowing it he had made the ghastly slip-up over the shoes and was now wearing one of Borlase's and one of his own."

"Exactly. But he did get to Borlase's suite quite safely. Later he crept out again and took the first train to Town. He can't, I think, have had any base in Sheercliff, or he would have made for it first and got into other clothes."

Derry Fisher had listened fascinated to this hypothetical reconstruction of events in which he himself had been obscurely involved. Now he broke in. "This man Krauss, sir—have you ever seen him?"

Merritt nodded. "Certainly. I was given an unobtrusive view of a good many of his kidney when I took on my present job."

"Could he be described as middle-aged and intellectual-looking; and does he smoke Russian cigarettes?"

"I don't know about his smoking, although there are people who will. But the description certainly fits."

"It certainly fits." Appleby nodded thoughtfully. "But then—it would fit Mark Borlase as well."

"*Mark* Borlase?" Merritt was puzzled.

"Stephen's cousin. They don't seem to have briefed you on the family, Merritt, quite as they should. Mark Borlase appears to have traveled up from Sheercliff today, although he has kept quiet about it. Fisher here saw him at Waterloo—and believes that he may even have followed the taxi of the girl who spotted the shoes. When I hear of anybody claiming actually to have seen your friend Krauss there, I shall begin to take rather more interest in him.

"Meanwhile, I'll keep my eye on Cousin Mark. You don't happen to be a member of the Wessex? A pity. He told us he's putting up there for the night. You could have taken a peep at him for yourself."

"I'm going to do my best to take a peep at Krauss." Captain Merritt rose. "I haven't much hope for that notebook—but one never knows. These fellows have peculiar ways. He may hold on to it till he gets his price."

"There's some comfort in that. Or Mark Borlase may."

Merritt moved to the door. "I think your Mark Borlase is a rank outsider."

"Fisher and I have our money on him, all the same."

When Merritt had departed, Appleby looked at his watch. "I wonder," he asked, "if you would care for a cup of tea? We make astonishing tea at the Yard. And capital anchovy toast."

"Thank you very much." Derry Fisher was disconcerted. "But oughtn't we—?"

Appleby smiled. "To be organizing the siege of the Wessex—or otherwise pushing effectively about? Well, I think we have an hour to relax in."

Derry stared. "Before—before something *happens?"*

"Before—my dear young man—we take a long shot at finally clearing up this odd business of a dead man's shoes."

"A black shoe and a brown—how very curious!"

"What did you say?" Jane Grove set down her teacup with a surprising clatter.

"And—dear me!—at Sheercliff." Jane's aunt, enjoyably interested, reached for a slice of cake. "You might have run into it. Which just shows, does it not? I mean, that in the midst of life we are in death. I've got a whole cherry."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Jane's voice trembled slightly.

"Something in the paper, dear," Jane's aunt propped the folded page against the milk jug. "A poor man found dead beneath the cliffs quite early this morning."

"Early this morning!"

"And something about *another* man. Will you have a third cup?"

"No. Go on."

"I intend to, dear. I *always* take three cups."

"I mean about the other man."

"The other man? Oh, yes. He seems to have traveled on a train, and to have worn mixed-up shoes too. There are people at Scotland Yard who want any information about him."

"May I see?" Jane took the evening paper and read without speaking.

"It couldn't be a new fashion?"

"A new fashion, aunt?"

"Wearing different-colored shoes. *Two* men, you see. But one—of course—now dead."

Jane laughed a little wildly. "No—not a new fashion." She got abruptly to her feet. "I think I must—"

"Yes, dear?"

Jane hesitated. "I must water the

pot. You might like a *fourth* cup."

She performed this commonplace action with a steady hand, and when she spoke again her tone was entirely casual. "I'm afraid I have to go out."

"To go out again, Jane—after your long day?"

"I—I've got to do something I forgot. It's rather important." Jane fetched her handbag and gloves. "I don't suppose I shall be very long."

"Very well, dear. But don't forget—you can't be too careful."

Jane Grove jumped. "Careful?"

"Of the traffic, dear. So dangerous nowadays."

Jane, standing by the window, smiled wryly. The quiet Kensington road was deserted. She lingered for some minutes. Then, as if reproaching herself for some lack of resolution, she hurried out.

Sir John Appleby's tea and anchovy toast, although it had all the appearance of being a leisurely and carefree affair, had a steady accompaniment of messages dispatched and received. Finally, Appleby's secretary came in and spoke with a trace of excitement.

"Fifteen Babcock Gardens, sir. And at five forty five."

"Good." Appleby rose briskly. "He did as he was told, and said he'd walk?"

"Yes. He's making for the Green Park now."

"That gives us all very good time. You've got three cars out?"

"They should be pretty well posted by now. We've studied the maps and had a report from the section."

Appleby nodded and signaled to Derry Fisher to follow him. "And what sort of problem does this house in Babcock Gardens look like presenting?"

"Tricky, sir—but it might be worse. At a corner, but very quiet. All the houses there have basements with areas. There's a deserted cabmen's shelter over the way." The secretary hesitated. "Are you taking a bit of a risk, sir?"

"That's as it will appear." Appleby's tone suggested that he found this question not wholly in order. "And now we'll be off."

"You car's outside, sir—with the short-wave tested and correct."

Below, a discreetly powerful limousine was waiting, and into this Derry Fisher found himself bundled. It had a table with street plans, and it was filled with low-pitched precise speech. Appleby had no sooner sat down than he joined in. The effect, as of an invisible conference, was very exciting.

Derry had been involved in this sort of thing before—but only in the cinema. He rather expected the car to go hurtling through London with a screaming siren. The pace, however, proved to be nothing out of the ordinary. Turning into the Mall, they moved as sedately as if in a procession. Carlton House Terrace seemed to go on forever, and the Royal Standard fluttering

above Buckingham Palace drew only very slowly nearer. When they rounded Queen Victoria on her elaborate pedestal and swung round for Constitution Hill, it was at a speed that seemed more appropriate to sightseers than to emissaries of the law.

But if the car dawdled, Derry's mind moved fast—much faster than it was accustomed to do in the interest of his uncle's business. He had never heard of Babcock Gardens, but he guessed that it was an address in Kensington—and the address, too, which he had failed to hear the girl giving at Waterloo that morning. And somebody was walking to it—walking to it through the Green Park. And Appleby had acknowledged that the girl was in danger, and Appleby's secretary had let slip misgivings over the riskiness of what was now going on.

What *was* now going on?

Quite clearly, the setting of a trap.

Appleby was setting a trap, with the girl as bait.

"I ought to tell you that there may be a little shooting before we're through with this."

Derry jumped. Appleby, apparently unconscious of any strain, had murmured the words in his ear. "Shooting, sir—you mean at the girl?"

"But all this is a very long shot." Appleby had ominously ignored the question. "It mayn't come off at all. But it's going to be uncommonly labor-saving if it does . . . I think we turn out of Knightsbridge at the next corner."

Derry was silent. He felt helpless and afraid. The crawl continued. Appleby was again absorbed in listening to reports and giving orders. But he had time for one brief aside.

"Complicated, you know. Lurking for lurkers. Requires the policeman's most catlike tread. Not like marching up and making an arrest in the name of the law."

Again Derry said nothing; he didn't feel at all like mild fun. Suddenly the pace increased. Appleby's dispositions—whatever they were—appeared to be completed.

The car now ran through broad, quiet streets between rows of solidly prosperous-looking houses. Presently it turned left into a narrower road, and then left again into what seemed a deserted mews. And there it drew to a halt.

Appleby jumped out. "The unobtrusive approach to our grandstand seat."

Derry followed. "A grandstand seat?"

"We are at the back of Babcock Gardens. A surprised but obliging citizen is giving us the run of his dining room. Number fifteen is just opposite."

It seemed to Derry Fisher afterward that what followed was all over in a flash. The dining room of the obliging citizen was somber

and Victorian, and this gave the sunlit street outside, viewed through a large bay window, something of the appearance of a theatrical scene—an empty stage awaiting the entrance of actors and the beginning of an action.

Suddenly it was peopled—and the action had taken place. The house opposite stood at a corner. Round this came the figure of a man, glancing upward, as if in search of a street number.

Derry had time only to realize that the man looked familiar when the door of number 15 opened and a girl came down the steps. It was the girl of Derry's encounter on the train that morning.

She had almost reached the footpath when she staggered and fell—and in the same instant there came the crack of a revolver shot.

The man was standing still, apparently staring at her intently. Derry could see only his back. But he now knew that it was the back of Mark Borlase.

Borlase took a step forward. Simultaneously another figure leaped across the road—it must have been from the corresponding corner—and made a dash for Borlase. It was Merritt. What he intended seemed to be a flying tackle.

But before he could bring this off, yet another figure dramatically appeared. A uniformed policeman, hurling himself up the area steps of number 15, took the charging Merritt in the flank and brought him crashing to the ground. In an instant there were policemen all over the place.

"Come along." Appleby touched the horrified Derry Fisher on the arm. They hurried out. Mark Borlase had not moved. Shocked and bewildered, he was looking from one side to the other. On his left, Merritt had been hauled to his feet, and stood collared by two powerful constables.

On his right, still sprawled on the steps of number 15, lay the girl—a pool of blood forming beneath one arm.

Derry ran toward her, his heart pounding. As he did so, she raised herself, and with a groping movement found her handbag. For a moment, and with a queerly expressionless face, she gazed at Merritt and at the men who held him. Then with her uninjured arm she opened her bag, drew out a small glittering object and thrust it in her mouth.

"Stop her!"

Appleby's cry was too late. Another revolver shot broke the quiet of Babcock Gardens. Incredibly—incredibly and horribly—Derry Fisher's beautiful girl had blown her brains out.

Late that evening Appleby explained.

"There was never much doubt, Mr. Borlase, that your cousin had been murdered. And clearly the crime was not one of passion or im-

pulse. The background of the case was international espionage. Sir Stephen was killed in order to obtain an important scientific secret and to eliminate the only brain capable of reproducing it. There may have been an attempt—conceivably by the man Krauss—to get at Sir Stephen by the ideological route. But that had certainly come to nothing. You agree?"

Mark Borlase nodded. "Stephen—as I insisted to you—was really perfectly sound. He worried me at times, it is true—and it was only yesterday that I felt I ought to go down and have a word with him. Actually, we didn't meet. I got him on the telephone and knew at once that there was no question of any trouble at the moment. So I concealed the fact that I was actually in Sheercliff, put up at the Grand for the night, and came back this morning. I ought to have been franker when you challenged me, no doubt."

"It has all come out straight in the wash, Mr. Borlase. And now let me go on. Here was a professional crime. This made me at once suspicious of the genuineness of any *mix-up* over those shoes. *But they might be a trick designed to mislead.* And if that was so, I was up against a mind given to doing things *ingeniously*. I made a note that it might be possible to exploit that later.

"Now the train. I came away from my inspection of it convinced that the girl's story was a fabrication from start to finish. The fact stared me in the face."

Derry Fisher sat up straight. "But how *could* it? I've chewed over it again and again—"

"My dear young man, these things are not your profession. This girl, representing herself as badly frightened, ignored three compartments—in two of which she would have found feminine support and comfort—and chose to burst in on a solitary and suitably impressionable young man of her own age.

"Again, while the mysterious man with the different-colored shoes would certainly have retreated *up* the train, the rifled suitcase was *down* the train—the direction in which the girl herself went off unaccompanied, for her cup of coffee.

"Again, the Russian cigarettes had discernibly been smoked in a holder. On one of them, nevertheless, there was a tiny smear of lipstick."

Appleby turned to Derry. "I think I mentioned it to you at the time."

"Mentioned it?" Derry was bewildered—and then light came to him. "When you made that silly—that joke about seeing Red?"

"I'm afraid so. Well now, the case was beginning to come clear. Sir Stephen's body had been dropped on that rock, and not into the sea, deliberately; we were *meant* to find it in the strange clothes and the unaccountable shoes—otherwise the

whole elaborate false trail laid by the girl on her railway journey would be meaningless.

"But *why* this elaboration? There seemed only one answer. To serve as an alibi, conclusive from the start, for somebody anxious to avoid any intensive investigation. My thoughts turned to Merritt as soon as he produced that streamlined picture of the man Krauss as the criminal."

Mark Borlase nodded. "And so you set a trap for him?"

"Precisely. But first, let me give you briefly what my guess about Merritt was. He had been offered money—big and tempting money—to do *both* things: get the notebook and liquidate Sir Stephen. He saw his chance in Sir Stephen's habit of taking that nocturnal stroll. Last night he simply followed him up to the Head, killed and robbed him, and dressed the body in clothes he had already concealed for the purpose, including the odd shoes.

"Then he dropped the body over the cliff so that it would fall just where it did, returned to the Metropole, and telephoned his confederate to begin playing *her* part on the 8:05 this morning. The girl—her name was Jane Grove—was devoted to him. And she played her part very well—to the end, I'd say."

For a moment there was silence in Appleby's room. Then Derry asked a question. "And your trap?"

"It depended on what is pretty well an axiom in detective investigation. A criminal who has—successfully, he thinks—brought off an ingenious trick will try to bring off another, twice as ingenious, if you give him a chance. Still guessing—for I really had no evidence against Merritt at all—I gave him such a chance just as irresistibly as I could.

"The girl, you see, must come forward, and repeat the yarn she had told on the train. That was essential to the convincingness of the whole story. It was, of course, a yarn about encountering a man who doesn't exist. For this *nobody* I determined to persuade Merritt to substitute a *somebody*: yourself, Mr. Borlase. You had been on that train and had concealed the fact.

"I let Merritt have this information. I gave him the impression that I strongly suspected you. I let slip the information that you could be reached at your club, the Wessex. And as soon as Merritt had left I got a message to you there myself, explaining what I wanted and asking you to cooperate. You did so, most admirably, and I am very grateful to you."

Mark Borlase inclined his head. "A blood hunt isn't much in my line, I'm bound to say. But it seemed proper that Stephen's murder should be brought to book."

Derry Fisher looked perplexed. "I don't see how Merritt—"

"It was simple enough." Appleby broke off to take a telephone call, and then resumed his explanation.

"Merritt represented himself to Mr. Borlase on the telephone as my secretary and asked him to come to my private address—which he gave as fifteen Babcock Gardens—at five forty-five. He then got in touch with the girl and arranged *his* trap." Appleby smiled grimly. "He didn't know it was *our* trap too."

"He was going to incriminate Mr. Borlase?"

"Just that. Remember, you would have been able to swear that you saw Mr. Borlase leaving Waterloo in a taxi just behind the girl. From this would follow the inference that Mr. Borlase had tracked her to her home; and that after his interview here he had decided that he must silence her."

"But Merritt didn't himself mean to—to kill the girl?"

"He meant to stage an attempted murder by Mr. Borlase, and to that he must have nerved her on the telephone. It all had to be very nicely timed."

Mark Borlase suddenly shivered. "He was going to have me arrested, after he had himself winged the girl? He would have said the revolver was mine—that sort of thing?"

"Yes. He may even have meant to kill you, and maintain that it had happened in the course of a struggle or self-defense. Then the girl would have identified *you* as the man with the odd shoes. And that would have been that."

"How would he have explained being on the scene—there in Babcock Gardens, I mean—at all?"

"By declaring that I had prompted him to go and have a look at you at your club and that he had spotted you coming out and had decided to shadow you. It would have been some such story as that. He had lost his head a bit, I'd say, in pursuit of this final ingenuity. It was criminal artistry, of a sort. But it was thoroughly crazy artistry as well."

"And Stephen's notebook?"

"That telephone call was to say it has been found with Merritt's things. Merritt thought himself absolutely safe, and he was determined to hold out for the highest possible price."

Appleby rose. "Well, that's the whole thing. And we shall none of us be sorry to go to bed."

As they said goodbye, Derry Fisher hesitated. "May I ask one more question?"

"Certainly."

"The shooting in Babcock Gardens was an afterthought of Merritt's—and I think it was the afterthought of a fiend. But why—after you had examined the train and guessed nearly the whole truth —did you tell me that the girl was in danger?"

"She was in danger of the gallows, Mr. Fisher. But at least she has escaped *that*."

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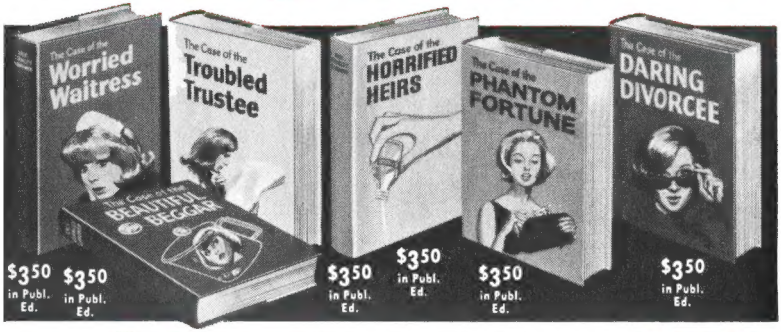
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